consumer electronics

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September 2005
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0 74470 58421 6

The sleek, free-flowing lines of Sanus Platinum furniture reflect the beauty of today's digital televisions. And the newest addition, model PFFP flat panel TV stand, opens up possibilities to mount a flat panel television anywhere. An extruded aluminum column extends rigid strength from the steel-framed base to handle flat panel TVs up to 50". The Virtual Axis™ tilting system provides smooth motion with the touch of a fingertip. And features like a hidden cable channel, an adjustable glass shelf and a custom blended silver finish provide the perfect finishing touches to this innovative flat panel TV stand. So if your home theater is short on wall space, your options are now wide open.

SANUS | SYSTEMS

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800.359.5520 www.sanus.com

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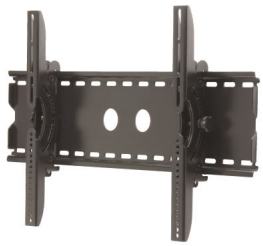
Plasma TVs are really making waves. So how do you choose a mount worthy of the splendor of a plasma TV? Easy. Choose a VisionMount™ flat panel TV wall mount from Sanus. Its simple elegance gives you one of the strongest, most durable mounts...with installation completed in just minutes. And the Virtual Axis™ mechanism allows you to adjust the tilt with an effortless fingertip touch...even if your TV weighs 175 pounds. So wherever your plasma TV is destined to be, VisionMount can easily handle your installation and positioning needs, and you can spend your time reflecting on the real beauty of your home theater.



VisionMount™ model VMPLb shown. Fits virtually any flat panel TV from 32" up to 60". Available in black and silver.

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isf® Joel Silver ISF

We welcome Screen Research to an elite group of color scientists who boldly engineer screens with a focus on Home Theater! The folks at Screen Research should be complimented for supplying a screen that has not compromised acoustic transparency or sacrificed visual accuracy for gain – something that is increasingly rare these days.

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Do you know that most movie sound – and not just dialogue – plays through the center speaker?

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Although common "perforated" screens allow sound through, they cause audio problems (comb filtering) and suffer from visual distortions (moiré) when used with today's digital projectors. As a result, installers resort to solid screens and reluctantly place the center speaker above or below the screen – a fundamental no-no.

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feature topic

Laptops

From university students to busy working moms, we all love laptops that free us from the wires and tangles of conventional PCs while keeping us connected to our friends, family, and colleagues. But investing in the best laptop for you can be an intimidating and costly process, unless you know exactly what to look for and exactly what you need. Before taking the plunge, read this month's cover stories so nothing will prevent you from buying the perfect laptop for your lifestyle.

44 **Portable Power**
Here's What To Look For In Laptops

48 **Best Laptops For Women**
Pretty Is As Pretty Does: We Want Performance

52 **Laptop Buying Guide**
You Can Always Get What You Want

56 **You Can Take It With You**
Best Accessories For Your Laptop

60 **Editor's Top 10**
Reasons I Love These Devices

62 **Tips**
Keep Your Laptop Bag Light

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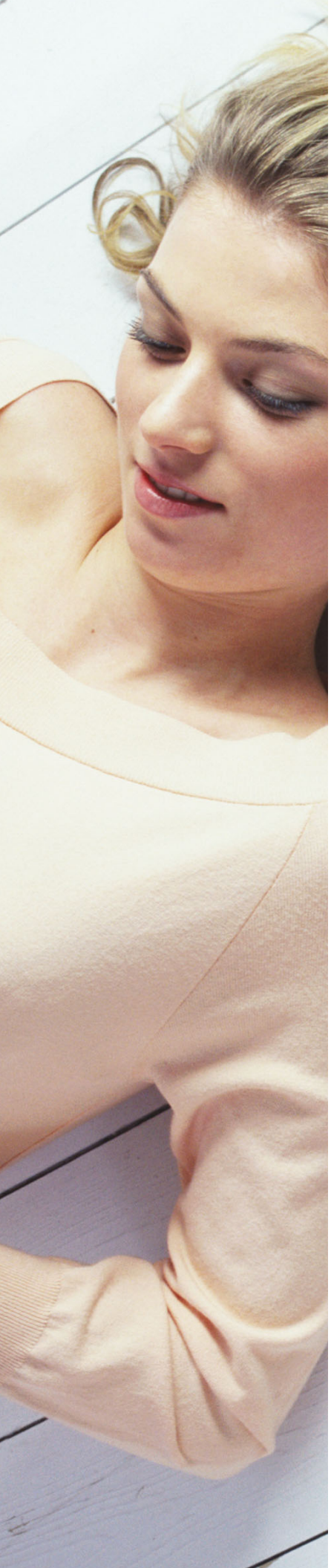
Table Of Contents
Volume 2 Issue 8



Open

There's always something new, interesting, and stylish happening in the world of consumer electronics. That's why the Open section packs the latest news and trends into the first few pages of *CE Lifestyles*, along with the sparkle and bling that you can buy to accessorize your devices.

10 **CE News**

18 **ShelfWatch**
A Look At The Latest Consumer Electronics

20 **Outfit Your Life**
Accessories With Style

22 **Shopping Site Of The Month**
Cover Girl Beauty Consultation (www.covergirl.com)

24 **Leisure Time Around The World**
Cross-Cultural CE Use

A/V Club

Some of our favorite electronic gadgets are the ones that provide the sounds and pictures that move and entertain us and our friends and family. Whether you want to put together a wireless audio system for your home or just want help using the plasma TV in your living room, A/V Club can help.

28 **A Pocketful Of Fun**
Sony's PlayStation Portable Amuses Us All

32 **Media Players Head To Head**
Music & Video, Just The Way You Like

37 **Satellite Radio**
Your Bit Of Blue Sky

42 **Tips**
Tame Wild Volume Levels

Digital Studio

Digital cameras and camcorders are changing the way we record the moments of our lives, from quick snapshots of favorite vacation spots to priceless video clips of first steps and other important milestones. Get to know your new digicam or camcorder and learn what to do with your photos and video once you have them.

64 **Digital Camera Accessories**
Must-Haves For Back-To-School

66 **Know How**
One Problem, Three Solutions

70 **Artsy Photo Effects**
From Monotonous To Monet

74 **Tips**
Buy The Right Digital Camcorder

CE @Home

The consumer electronics in our homes are no longer limited to TVs and DVD players. Smart appliances, home automation, and whole-house audio systems are becoming more and more common and affordable for families, and with so much available, why check CE at the door?

76 **Invasion Of The Pod People**
The Hardest Part Of Accessorizing Your iPod Is Deciding Where To Begin

80 **Get Ready For Baby!**
Use CE To Keep You & Your Baby Happy & Safe

86 **Tips**
Pick The Perfect Playlist

CE Lite

Most CE devices are all about fun. Here, we'll tell you about the latest albums and films to catch, so you can make sure your entertainment is as up-to-date as your gear. And so as not to forget our roots, "Retroscope" traces how a favorite CE device has changed over the years.

106 **Music & Movies**

108 **Games & Gifts**

110 **Retroscope**

112 **Exit**

Editor's Note

September is my second favorite month (after only August), because it signals the beginning of the loveliest of seasons, autumn. And this month I have even more to celebrate in September because my first wedding anniversary is September 24.

When I think back to one year ago and all the fawning and fussing that goes with planning a wedding, I'm amazed that weddings actually happened without something that's been around only relatively recently—the Internet. What strange bedfellows weddings and the Web are, but ask any newlywed or bride-to-be and she'll tell you that it's an invaluable resource for ideas, prices, and advice. If I had questions about anything, from Catholic ceremonies to how much I should spend on vellum paper, I'd find an answer on any number of Web sites I had bookmarked for just that purpose.

The Internet isn't the only tech side to weddings. Most wedding photographers nowadays shoot in digital, allowing brides see their proofs in online galleries before they've left on their honeymoon, and the only limit to editing wedding photos is the bride and groom's imaginations. Slideshows made on a laptop computer are also popular at receptions, prenuptial dinners, or bridal breakfasts. And DJs can plan out an entire reception worth of music ahead of time by creating a playlist on their audio equipment.

It's funny how the rituals and customs of an ancient institution such as marriage are constantly being influenced and shaped by cutting-edge, modern technology. It just goes to show that, no matter how traditional we are or how hard we try to follow strict rules of etiquette, some things will *always* change.

Live well, friends.

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ce news

Compiled by Rachel Derowitsch

High Court Rules Against File-Sharing Software Makers In MGM v. Grokster

On June 27, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled in favor of MGM and 27 other entertainment companies that sued the makers of Morpheus, Grokster, and Kazaa P2P (peer-to-peer) file-sharing programs. The unanimous decision handed down in the MGM v. Grokster case states that companies that make file-sharing programs can be held liable if customers use these programs for illegal purposes and if courts determined that the intent of the companies was to encourage theft through the distribution and use of their products.

Previously, a district and federal court each sided with the P2P program makers, following the precedent set in the Sony Corporation of America v. Universal City Studios case. That famous case yielded the landmark Sony Betamax ruling in 1984, which stated that the distributor of a product can't be held liable for copyright infringement committed by consumers using the product, so long as that product can be used for significant non-infringement purposes.

Critics of the most recent ruling say the court's decision could hinder the release of new technologies.

An NPD Group report released just before the ruling found that although the paid download digital music market is growing, P2P services still dominate. In March, for example, 243 million songs were downloaded from P2P services, while only 26 million were bought at online digital music stores. The NPD Group estimated that the current market potential for digital music services is 30 million customers.

Orlando Pulls The Plug On Free Wi-Fi Service

Last month we told you about America's most "unwired" cities, metro areas where residents and visitors can easily find wireless accessibility spots. Now, we know why Orlando, Fla., didn't crack the Top 20.

City officials in this popular tourist destination have eliminated free Internet service in downtown "hot spots," according to the *Orlando Sentinel*, due to a lack of interest. On average, only 27 people a day were using the wireless service, even though as many as 200 could go online simultaneously in at least one of those locations.

Although they would like to continue to offer the wireless service, city officials couldn't defend the $1,800 monthly expense.

GE Monogram: For The Wine Connoisseur Who Has Everything

Have a growing wine collection and need a place to store or display it? When you're ready to spare no expense, take more than a sideways glance at GE's new Monogram Walk-In Wine Vault (www.monogram.com).

The vault is roomy enough to store hundreds of bottles of wine. It's roughly 7.5 x 8.7 x 7.8 feet (HxWxD). And you can choose between two interior designs: redwood inventory racks, which can hold about 1,100 bottles, and redwood display racks, which can hold about 975 bottles. GE's inventory tracking system, which includes a touch-screen display and a tag printer, lets you classify each bottle you enter into the system and look up your wines based on country of origin, vintage, price, maturity, and more.

The 3000 BTU cooling system, which uses a self-calibrating temperature probe, can chill the wine to 55 degrees and keep a consistent humidity level.

The Monogram is available on a limited basis in specific markets. According to a GE spokesperson, the estimated retail price of the vault is $30,000.

HP Tops In Online Customer Service

A survey of customers who shop for computer products and services online finds that HP is tops in its treatment of shoppers. The Online Customer Respect Study, 2Q 2005, grades companies and their Web sites on simplicity, responsiveness, privacy, attitude, transparency, and principles and gives each a CRI (Customer Respect Index) score.

Responsiveness is the greatest area of weakness for companies. The survey found that 27% of all emails to the companies' Web sites were ignored entirely. On the other hand, companies improved the most overall in matters of privacy.

A score of 8.0 and above is considered excellent. The Web sites of only two companies, HP and Xerox, received that mark. Interestingly, Toshiba America ranked in the bottom five with a 4.0 CRI, even though Toshiba tops all other companies in sales of laptop computers (see story in Marketplace).

Customer Respect Study: Top 10 Online Computer Companies

Company	Customer Respect Index
1. Hewlett-Packard	8.7
2. Xerox	8.1
3. Microsoft	7.9
4. Dell	7.8
5. Gateway	7.6
6. Symantec	7.6
7. Electronic Arts	7.4
8. Accenture	7.3
9. Adobe Systems	7.1
10. Electronic Data Systems	7.1

Source: The Customer Respect Group

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m a r k e t p l a c e

LCD TV Shipments Rise 125% In Q1 2005

The worldwide shipment of 10-inch and larger LCD TVs grew 125% in the first quarter of 2005 from the same quarter in 2004, according to DisplaySearch, a flat-panel display market research and consulting firm.

The growth over 12 months came despite a 13% post-holiday shopping dip in shipments from Q4 2004 to Q1 2005. DisplaySearch also reports that prices for most 20-inch and larger LCD TVs dropped at least 20% during Q1 2005.

The reports from DisplaySearch also show that Sharp has more than doubled the percentage of its global market share compared with the share of its closest competitors. Sharp leads in shipments of TVs in six display size categories, including the largest size: 45 inches and above.

Worldwide Branded LCD TV Market Share

Brand	Q1 '05 Market Share	Q1 '04 to Q1 '05 Growth (percentage)
1. Sharp	21.0	82
2. Philips	10.9	129
3. Samsung	10.8	109
4. Sony	10.0	74
5. LGE	7.3	57
6. Other	40.0	216

Source: DisplaySearch.com

Most Popular Laptop Brands

The race for the top spot in laptop sales is close between Toshiba and HP, according to March sales. Total dollar volume for laptops sold that month was more than $940 million.

Brand	Market Share (percentage)
1. Toshiba	23.0
2. Hewlett-Packard	22.8
3. IBM	18.7
4. Sony	9.1
5. Compaq	8.1

Source: The NPD Group/NPD Techworld

tidbits

Moms easily outdistance dads as the primary photographer, videographer, and archivist for families. Of those surveyed, 70% say they'd likely take the time to learn a new technology that would help protect against the loss of family photos and videos.

Source: Sony/The Parenting Group's Mom Connection Network

The notion that wireless hot spots are unsafe is one of the five most overhyped IT security threats, according to analysts who participated in the Gartner IT Security Summit in June.

Source: Gartner

21% of Web users primarily read the online version of their preferred newspaper. Women make up 47% of this segment of online news readership.

Source: Nielsen/NetRatings

97% of those surveyed in a Cyber Security Industry Alliance poll say identity theft is a serious problem, and 48% report that they avoid buying online for fear that their personal financial data might be stolen.

Source: Cyber Security Industry Alliance

One-third of Travelocity members surveyed say they are more stressed if they are not plugged-in while on vacation, whether through a cell phone, PDA, or laptop. 40% say they check their work email while on vacation, and 25% say they take their laptops with them on vacation.

Source: Travelocity

About 7% of households with an Internet connection have a home control system, which automatically controls such things as lights, room temperature, and security. Another 29% of those households are interested in buying such a system if the price is $200 to $400.

Source: The Diffusion Group

Denon's philosophy is simple.

Either
you're
innovating
or
you're
imitating.

Introducing Denon's New AVR-5805

The World's First 10-channel A/V Receiver With Fully Configurable 4-zone Capabilities

A Breakthrough In Multi-source, Multi-zone Flexibility

For the home entertainment enthusiast and custom installer alike, Denon's new AVR-5805 delivers unprecedented four-zone home entertainment integration and control — all from a single component. With 10 configurable and discrete amplifiers, 16-channels of audio output, and the world's first-ever ability to drive two fully independent 5.1 systems, the AVR-5805 will also route audio and video signals from up to four independent sources and distribute them to up to four separate zones throughout the home. Its advanced capabilities even allow discrete power, source selection and volume control of each zone. And flexibility is just the beginning. Read on.

Masterful Technologies And A "Sweet Spot" For Every Listener

Behind the AVR-5805's newly designed, easy-to-read front panel display is a profusion of powerful technologies. An Equal Power amplifier section delivers a massive 170 watts of high-current power into each of its ten channels, processing for every popular 7.1-, 6.1- and 5.1-channel surround sound format — from Dolby (including Pro Logic IIx) and dts, to THX Ultra2 and THX Surround EX. The AVR-5805 also introduces the latest in Auto Setup Calibration and Equalization with the Audyssey MultEQ$_{XT}$ system, tailoring sound not only to the listening environment but also to the audience. This advanced technology analyzes and calibrates six critical settings including variable crossover point detection. It also determines the correct frequency response for up to six separate listener positions and then averages all six. The result? Literally a "sweet spot" for every listener in the room.

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The AVR-5805 offers a full complement of advanced processing capabilities like HDMI/DVI digital video selection, video up-scaling (including Faroudja DCDi technology for analog sources) and the world's first dual, independent video conversion for unmatched simplicity and the highest picture quality from all your video gear. For even greater A/V performance, it employs the most advanced Texas Instruments' and Analog Devices' 32-bit DSP processors, Burr-Brown 24-bit/192kHz audio DACs, as well as Denon's newly improved DDSC-D (Dynamic Discrete Surround Decoder-Digital). And to top it off, exclusive Advanced AL24 Processing Plus circuitry maximizes all source signals so that the high-resolution DA converters work at peak capacity.

More Connection Options Than Any Receiver In The Industry

In addition to an extensive complement of digital and analog A/V connections, the AVR-5805 includes a full array of "custom installation" features: assignable high amperage DC trigger outputs, dual RS-232C ports to facilitate integrated system and PC connectivity, and a built-in Ethernet port that adds more system control as well as future updates and upgrades. In-demand connection options include 6 high-bandwidth (100 MHz,) HDTV-compatible component video inputs, HD switching for 2 zones and much more. Finally, the latest version of Denon Link 3 and dual IEEE-1394 inputs allow for reception of high-resolution, multi-channel digital audio data directly from compatibly equipped DVD players. It all adds up to total flexibility and the ultimate level of sonic performance. Denon does it again.

DENON

The First Name in Digital Audio

shelfwatch

BY GREGORY ANDERSON

Audio and video surround us, inform us, and entertain us. This month's selections help us control and improve those media experiences.

LG 50PY2DR

$7,999

www.lge.com

This isn't "just" another high-definition flatscreen television. No, it's the *perfect* TV for the new season of "Desperate Housewives." It also includes a built-in hard drive for scheduling, recording, and timeshifting (pause, rewind) up to 13 hours of HD (and 63 hours of SD) programming. You'll never miss another breathless moment from Wisteria Lane.

Samsung DVD-HD950

$249

www.samsung.com

Once you've taken the plunge to high definition, make sure movies share in your television's promise. Samsung's new high-definition conversion player upconverts DVD signals (at 480 lines of resolution) to HD-quality (720 or 1080 lines). It also supports new DVD-Audio and Super Audio CD music formats for surround sound versions of your favorite albums. Sabrina never looked so good.

Sony HDR-HC1

$1,999.99

www.sonystyle.com

Don't just capture your daughter's amazing goalie saves. Get every blade of grass she kicks up on the way to the ball. Sony's new widescreen 1080i (the highest of high-def resolutions) camcorder will put a new spin on those highlight discs. And the 1.8-pound, 3- x 3.3- x 7.5-inch (HxWxD) case won't have you crying foul.

GPX SportX HW6805DT

$129.99

www.gpx.com

Forget trying to juggle your music player, headphones, and cycle handles while you work out. The SportX headset combines earbuds, music player controls, and 128MB of storage into one unit that wraps around the back of your head. Play MP3 and WMA (Windows Media Audio) files or FM radio. And focus on your workout instead of its soundtrack.

palmOne LifeDrive

$499

www.palmone.com

palmOne calls its new LifeDrive a mobile manager. To be sure, it's mobile (just 4.8 x 2.9 inches, with a 3.7-inch color screen). And it manages plenty: 300 songs, 1,000 photos, or 2-1/2 hours of video. Add Wi-Fi or Bluetooth connectivity for email or Web browsing. Mix in all your calendar, address book, word processing, and spreadsheet needs. Mobile manager, indeed.

outfit your life

Accessories With Style

September looks good.

COMPILED BY SEAN DOOLITTLE

Pocket Full of Puter
$215 • www.melissabethdesigns.com

Melissa Zahn of Melissabeth Designs brings the funk once again with the Pocket Full of Puter notebook tote. The bag features foam interlining, leather trim, and a Teflon-treated exterior for extra durability and stain-friendliness. Get it in Orange (shown), Party Pink (polka dot interior), Sky Blue (swirl interior), or Pear Green (stripe interior).

Coach Zebra Mini iPod Case
$98 • www.coach.com

Coach, the gold standard in handbags, invites you to give your iPod mini "the look of the wild" with this border-stitched, zebra-print case. Constructed of imported, dyed-hair calf leather, the case design includes a belt clip and a 12-inch strap with dog-leash clip. Dimensions: 2.25 x 4 inches. Keep an eye out for predators. . . .

TAG Heuer "Diamond Fiction" Chronograph
Estimated $1,203 U.S. (limited edition) • www.tagheuer.com

TAG Heuer has christened 2005/2006 the Year of Diamonds, launching two full lines of timepieces dubbed the New Women Collection to celebrate. According to the Swiss watchmaker, the collection is designed "for [Hollywood A-lister] Uma Thurman and the exceptional women she represents."

The haute couture mainspring of the collection is Diamond Fiction, a red satin bracelet encrusted with 879 Top Wesselton VS/SI diamonds equaling 5.8 carats. At the press of a button, red LEDs strategically mounted beneath the center diamonds display a glowing digital readout of the time amidst the ice. Fashion-forward women who do not earn $12 million per picture may select a watch from Heuer's *prét-à-porter* line: "Fashionable and feminine TAG Heuer creations as loaded with diamonds as the Haute Couture prototypes but ready to wear now."

Beyond Smart Coffee Maker
$128.99 • www.beyondconnectedhome.com

Is it just us, or do coffee and the Internet just seem to go together? If they didn't before, they do now. This 10-cup, black-and-stainless-steel bean juicer features a built-in Grind and Brew feature, and you can program and revise your caffeine production schedule from any Web browser. Good to the last drop.

Cool accessories.

Audiovox is always close to her heart. She loves her Audiovox MP3 Player with FM tuner. Her well-rounded DVD Player with built-in video games. And the big, blue display of her XM Satellite Radio with FM modulator is always nearby. Accessorize your life with Audiovox. Go to www.audiovox.com or call 1-800-645-4994.

MP3 Player

DVD Player

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Shopping Site Of The Month

Cover Girl Beauty Consultation

www.covergirl.com

OK, ladies, let's perform a little experiment. Head to your bathroom and take out your makeup bag. No, not that one. We're not concerned about the one filled with your favorites you use every day. We're looking for the stash of products you never use but won't throw away. How big is your collection?

It is a problem that's universal, and Cover Girl's free online Beauty Consultations can help you see which of those old products you should throw away. You can also head over to Shadow Salon and try out the eye shadow suggestions on your virtual eyes. It's a fun and free way to perfect your makeup colors and techniques.

Get Colormatched

From the home page, click Get A Beauty Consultation Now on the left side of the screen. Through a series of questions, Cover Girl will help you pinpoint makeup trouble areas and recommend appropriate products. Round one is about what you look like, including hair, eye, and skin color and the colors that flatter you most; round two will help you determine what facial features you want to emphasize and what you want to hide, such as blemishes.

You end up with a list of products that complement your coloring and clothing. Depending on your makeup needs, your personalized Make-Up Bag will include tips such as Luscious Lashes or Brow Shape-Up. After you exit the site, you can check out your Make-Up Bag whenever you log in using your email address.

Shadow Salon

To make a good thing great, Cover Girl offers Shadow Salon (in the Tips & Tricks drop-down menu). After becoming Colormatched, you can play to your heart's content with eye shadow looks that coordinate with your eyes.

Select a shadow kit with one, three, or four colors and choose a color palette from the selections provided just below the eyes. For helpful application hints, click either Nighttime Glamour or Fresh And Pretty to the right of your virtual eyes. Click a color from your palette to select it. Then, mouse over the applicator to "pick it up" and drag it to the eye. Click and drag the applicator across the eyelid to apply the shadow. When you "pick up" the applicator, your virtual eyes automatically close, and when you "put it down" after dragging it back to its starting point, they open so you can see the results. Apply mascara to complete your look.

Although the applicator is a little hard to control, it gives you a good idea of how color combinations will look on your eyes. Now print the page so you can remember the colors you used and repeat the success on your actual eyes.

BY JOY MARTIN

How Do They Do That?

Cover Girl is able to provide the Shadow Salon through the wonders of modern technology or, in this case, Macromedia Flash Player (www.macromedia.com). Flash is a free browser plug-in that lets Web sites jazz up their content by integrating features, such as video, graphics, audio, and text.

Many sites require Flash Player to use interactive portions of a site (such as the Shadow Salon) or to view animations. Because of this, it comes preinstalled with Windows XP and many Internet browsers. Chances are you already have Flash Player on your computer. However, if you are one of the few without it, you can access a free download of Flash Player at the Macromedia Web site.

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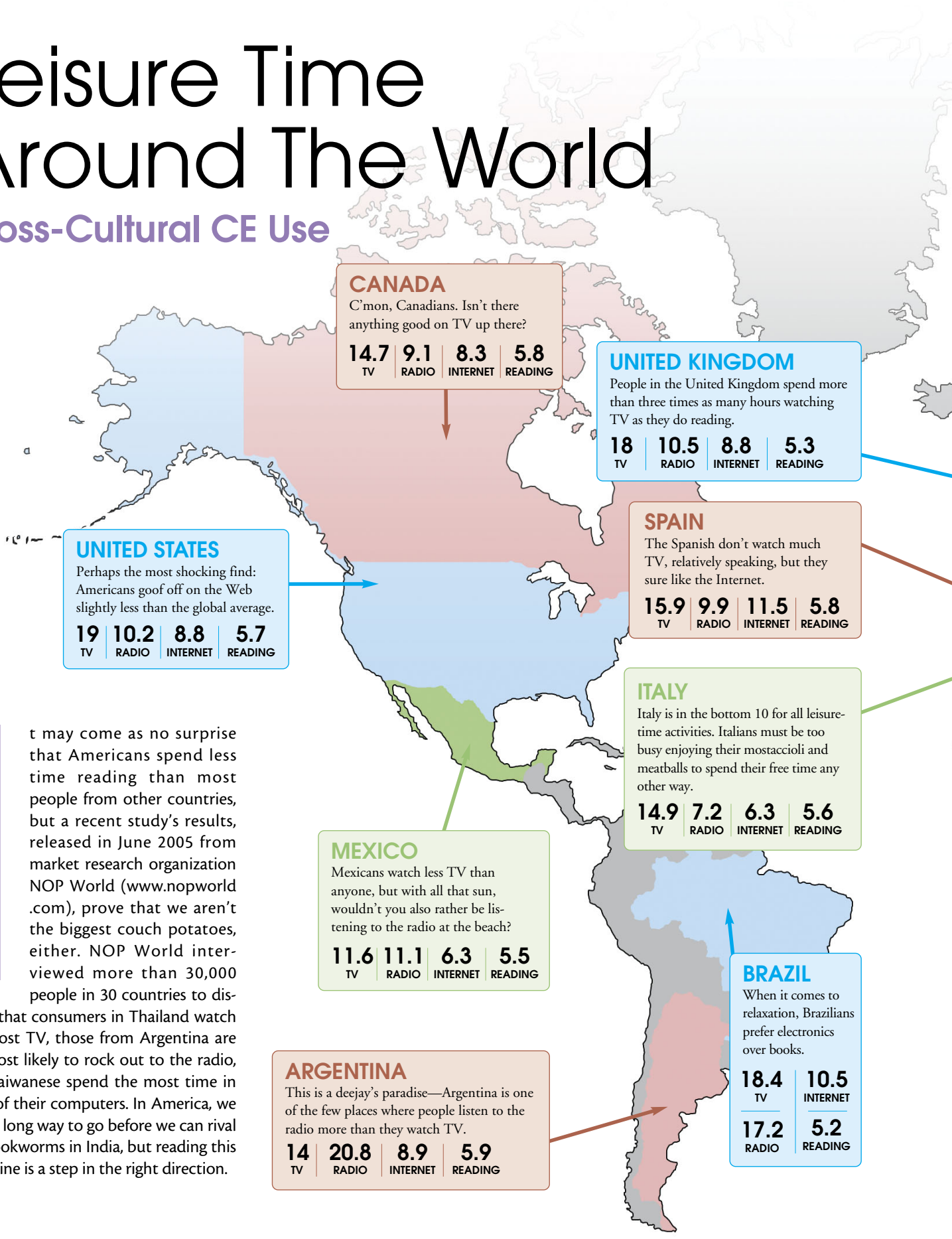
Leisure Time Around The World

Cross-Cultural CE Use



CANADA
C'mon, Canadians. Isn't there anything good on TV up there?

14.7	9.1	8.3	5.8
TV	RADIO	INTERNET	READING

UNITED KINGDOM
People in the United Kingdom spend more than three times as many hours watching TV as they do reading.

18	10.5	8.8	5.3
TV	RADIO	INTERNET	READING

UNITED STATES
Perhaps the most shocking find: Americans goof off on the Web slightly less than the global average.

19	10.2	8.8	5.7
TV	RADIO	INTERNET	READING

SPAIN
The Spanish don't watch much TV, relatively speaking, but they sure like the Internet.

15.9	9.9	11.5	5.8
TV	RADIO	INTERNET	READING

ITALY
Italy is in the bottom 10 for all leisure-time activities. Italians must be too busy enjoying their mostaccioli and meatballs to spend their free time any other way.

14.9	7.2	6.3	5.6
TV	RADIO	INTERNET	READING

MEXICO
Mexicans watch less TV than anyone, but with all that sun, wouldn't you also rather be listening to the radio at the beach?

11.6	11.1	6.3	5.5
TV	RADIO	INTERNET	READING

BRAZIL
When it comes to relaxation, Brazilians prefer electronics over books.

18.4	10.5	17.2	5.2
TV	INTERNET	RADIO	READING

ARGENTINA
This is a deejay's paradise—Argentina is one of the few places where people listen to the radio more than they watch TV.

14	20.8	8.9	5.9
TV	RADIO	INTERNET	READING

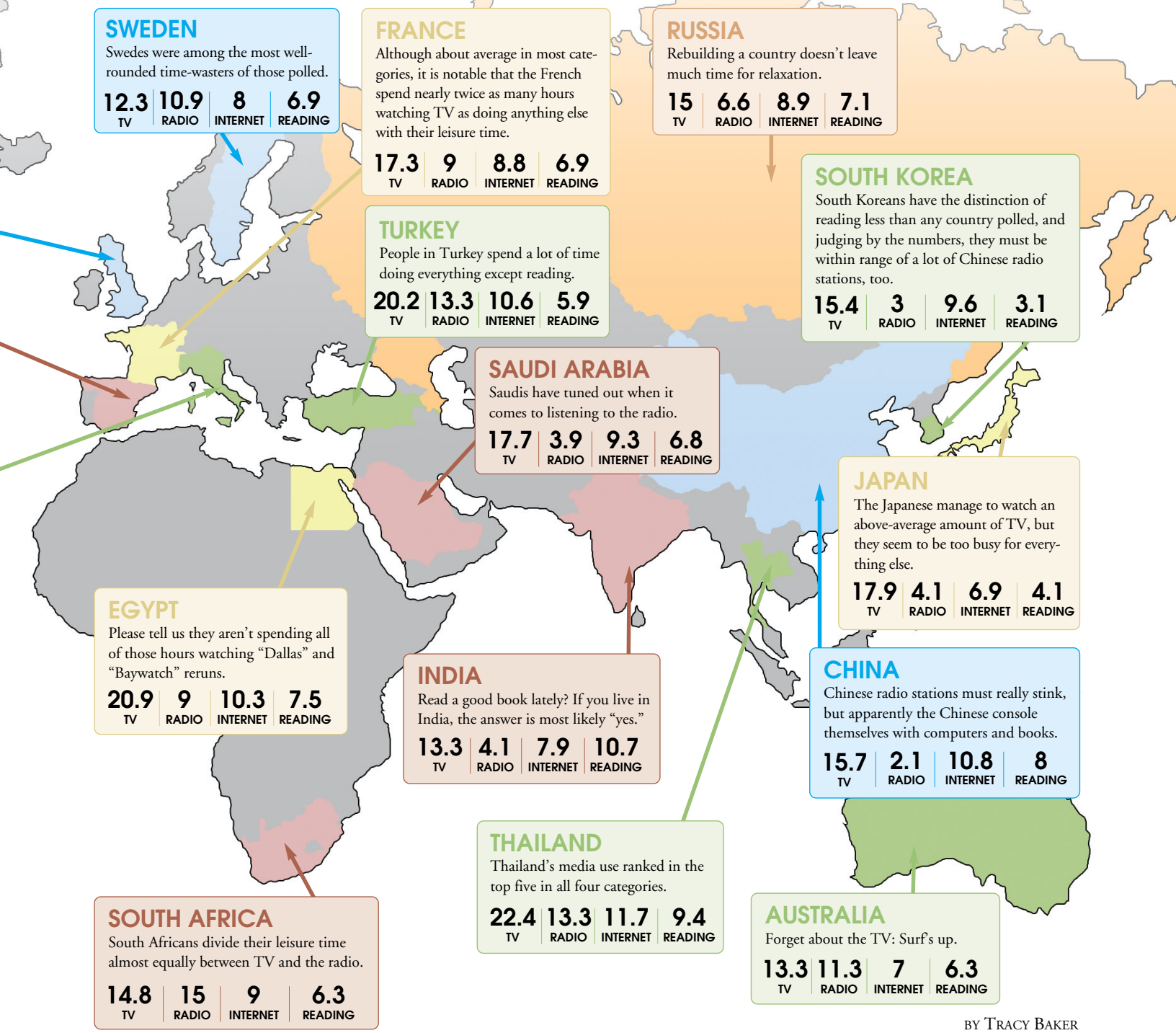
It may come as no surprise that Americans spend less time reading than most people from other countries, but a recent study's results, released in June 2005 from market research organization NOP World (www.nopworld.com), prove that we aren't the biggest couch potatoes, either. NOP World interviewed more than 30,000 people in 30 countries to discover that consumers in Thailand watch the most TV, those from Argentina are the most likely to rock out to the radio, and Taiwanese spend the most time in front of their computers. In America, we have a long way to go before we can rival the bookworms in India, but reading this magazine is a step in the right direction.

Global Average*

Librarians of the world, we feel for you. When people around the globe get some free time, they are, in most cases, more likely to flip on the TV, switch on the radio, or fire up their computers than they are to crack a book or magazine. While people in some countries read more than they listen to the radio or browse the Web, no country's average shows that people spend more time reading than watching TV. Let's hope it's all educational programming . . .

16.6 TV	8 RADIO	8.9 INTERNET	6.5 READING

*All averages are measured in hours per week, and Internet averages don't include time spent using this medium at work.



SWEDEN

Swedes were among the most well-rounded time-wasters of those polled.

12.3 TV	10.9 RADIO	8 INTERNET	6.9 READING

FRANCE

Although about average in most categories, it is notable that the French spend nearly twice as many hours watching TV as doing anything else with their leisure time.

17.3 TV	9 RADIO	8.8 INTERNET	6.9 READING

RUSSIA

Rebuilding a country doesn't leave much time for relaxation.

15 TV	6.6 RADIO	8.9 INTERNET	7.1 READING

SOUTH KOREA

South Koreans have the distinction of reading less than any country polled, and judging by the numbers, they must be within range of a lot of Chinese radio stations, too.

15.4 TV	3 RADIO	9.6 INTERNET	3.1 READING

TURKEY

People in Turkey spend a lot of time doing everything except reading.

20.2 TV	13.3 RADIO	10.6 INTERNET	5.9 READING

SAUDI ARABIA

Saudis have tuned out when it comes to listening to the radio.

17.7 TV	3.9 RADIO	9.3 INTERNET	6.8 READING

JAPAN

The Japanese manage to watch an above-average amount of TV, but they seem to be too busy for everything else.

17.9 TV	4.1 RADIO	6.9 INTERNET	4.1 READING

EGYPT

Please tell us they aren't spending all of those hours watching "Dallas" and "Baywatch" reruns.

20.9 TV	9 RADIO	10.3 INTERNET	7.5 READING

INDIA

Read a good book lately? If you live in India, the answer is most likely "yes."

13.3 TV	4.1 RADIO	7.9 INTERNET	10.7 READING

CHINA

Chinese radio stations must really stink, but apparently the Chinese console themselves with computers and books.

15.7 TV	2.1 RADIO	10.8 INTERNET	8 READING

THAILAND

Thailand's media use ranked in the top five in all four categories.

22.4 TV	13.3 RADIO	11.7 INTERNET	9.4 READING

AUSTRALIA

Forget about the TV: Surf's up.

13.3 TV	11.3 RADIO	7 INTERNET	6.3 READING

SOUTH AFRICA

South Africans divide their leisure time almost equally between TV and the radio.

14.8 TV	15 RADIO	9 INTERNET	6.3 READING

BY TRACY BAKER

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Sony's PlayStation Portable Amuses Us All

Sony's PSP (PlayStation Portable; www.us.playstation.com/psp.aspx) game console turns men and boys into slack-jawed ooglers almost as fast as an Angelina Jolie photo spread. If you've accompanied your husband, son, or boyfriend to your local electronics store, you've seen him scurry to the PSP section to gaze at Sony's latest wonder. He wants one, badly, and you know if you buy it you're a lock for the World's Greatest Wife and/or Mom and/or Girlfriend award, at least until the Xbox 360 comes along. But even if you're not passionate about games, you may want a PSP, as well. The PSP doubles as a portable movie player, triples as a digital audio player, and quadruples as a photo slideshow player. Not a bad bag of tricks for roughly $299.

We cajoled Sony into sending us a PSP so we could check out how good these collective features are. Sony sent us a "Limited Edition" PSP Value pack that includes a 32MB Memory Stick Duo, a cleaning cloth, a soft carrying case, a wrist strap, a pair of earbuds of somewhat questionable quality (as earbuds

for any portable audio/video device usually are), a wired remote, a power cord, and a copy of "Spider Man 2" on UMD (Universal Media Disc). The "Universal" in Universal Media Disc refers to this format's ability to play music, games, and movies and not its compatibility with other devices. UMDs (at least at this time) can only play on PSPs—the antithesis of universal. PSPs can also read Memory Sticks, which is where you'll store your music and photos, but we'll get to that later. We have games to play.

PSP Playtime

The PSP's gaming function is its raison d'etre and is generally the focus of all the hype surrounding the device. It's a blast to play games on the PSP, and the visual quality of the games is impressive given the PSP's small LCD. Many of the games are made for the 12 and under crowd, but there's still a good selection for older kids (like your husband). Of the 35 PSP games listed on Sony's PSP Web site at press time, 19 are rated E for Everyone or E10 for kids 10 and older. Hot titles include Lumines, a puzzle game, and the forthcoming Madden 2006 football game.

Playing games on the PSP is fun, but it won't supplant a PlayStation or Xbox game console if you already have one connected to your TV at home. On the other hand, you can't play a game console on the road (not easily, anyway), and a PSP game or two makes that trip from Des Moines to Cleveland seem a whole lot shorter.

At The Movies

UMD feature films also shorten long trips. Predictably, most UMD movie titles slant toward the more guy-friendly action/adventure genre, but there are enough UMD movies available that most people should be able to find a few they like. UMD movies usually cost about $19.99, although new and popular titles may cost $29.99. Most of the available UMD movies are in the PG-13 to R range. Curiously, several of the PG titles available are so ancient you probably watched them when you were a kid (such as "Short Circuit" and "The Dark Crystal"). We'd like to see a larger selection of current PG titles.

We watched the "Spider Man 2" UMD that came with our PSP. The video quality of the film was just as impressive as in the games. The PSP has a widescreen display that preserves the cinematic feel of the movie, and we enjoyed "Spider Man 2" on the little big screen so much that we forgot we were

Extra! Extra!

All handheld electronics worth their silicon practically require a slew of accessories. Just as you wouldn't wear Vera Wang without a complimentary necklace and earrings, you shouldn't take your PSP out of the box unless you're ready to dress it up. What follows are the most essential essentials you'll need for a new PSP.

Protection. The very first thing you should do when you unpack your PSP is apply a screen protector, which will protect the PSP's LCD from minor scratches. You should also keep a microfiber cleaning cloth on hand to keep your screen dust-free. Also, pick up a handful of UMD cases to safeguard your discs and a USB cable. The PSP Value Pack we received didn't include a cable, and you'll need it to transfer music and photos to your PSP through your PC. Most, if not all, of these accessories are available in starter kits from a variety of manufacturers. You should also invest in a hard metal case for your PSP (Nyko [www.nyko.com] and Intec [www.inteclink.com] both make good cases from $10 to $60), especially if the person who uses it most tends to have the "dropsies."

Memory. Memory Sticks serve many purposes for the PSP. Gamers save game files to memory sticks, and you can load your music and photos on them to use on the player. Storage sizes and prices vary. Look for Memory Stick Pro Duo media from Sony and SanDisk.

Audio. The earbuds that come with the PSP are, shall we say, not the most robust, so plan to pick up a good set of earbuds or headphones to replace them. Choices abound, but the earbuds included in MadCatz' PSP Micro Kit ($14.99; www.madcatz.com) and Pelican's Starter Kit II ($29.95; www.pelicanperformance.com) are pretty good and include many of the extras we mentioned earlier.

Power. The PSP's battery life is pretty impressive, but you'll still need a power supply close by to keep it juiced up. You should pick up a car adapter if you plan to take the PSP on road trips, and Pelican's Power Brick ($19.99; a powerful external battery) can recharge your PSP twice, which is convenient when there are no wall outlets available.

The Burden Of Ownership

A PSP is certainly more portable than, say, a laptop, but it's hardly as svelte as several other electronics you're inclined to schlep around. You'll definitely notice the extra weight when you carry it. The PSP measures 2.9 x 6.7 x 0.9 inches (HxWxD) and weighs more than half a pound (0.62lbs to be exact). Once you add the attendant gear, such as a hard protective case and spare Memory Stick cards and UMDs, your PlayStation Portable suddenly seems more like PlayStation luggage. You won't wear it on your sleeve, as you could an iPod shuffle (which is just over three inches long, three gum sticks thin, and weighs less than one-tenth of a pound), and it's not exactly pocket- or small purse-sized, either, as are most digital cameras. So be prepared to muscle up when you take your PSP with you.

watching it on a tiny PSP. The audio quality of movies (and the PSP in general) depends mostly on the quality of the headphones or earbuds you use. When paired with a good set of headphones, the PSP's movie and game audio sounds pretty good, but without them, it sounds like a bad set of TV speakers.

You can also play home video on the PSP if you have a large enough Memory Stick Duo to store the video and if the video is in the MPEG-4 (Moving Pictures Experts Group-4) format. Storing and playing your home-spun video on a PSP requires some PC gymnastics, however, so read the instructions carefully.

Tune Out

The PSP's ability to play music seems like a natural extension of its entertainment abilities. You can store music files on Memory Sticks and play the tracks on a PSP, which in theory seems like a great idea. You could park your current digital audio player in a desk drawer, load up a few Memory Sticks with your favorite tunes, and let the PSP slake all your entertainment desires.

We found, however, that there are a couple of hitches in the PSP's design that prevent it from completely taking over our portable audio duties.

First, the PSP has limited audio file support. It only plays MP3s and Sony's proprietary ATRAC3plus format. There's no support for Microsoft's very popular and widely supported WMA (Windows Media Audio) format or the decidedly less popular but still very cool Ogg Vorbis format. We think a wider choice of audio formats would greatly increase the PSP's appeal to music lovers.

Another concession the PSP makes to digital audio players is size. The PSP is considerably larger and heavier than any portable digital audio player you'll find, and how could it not be considering all the things it does? If you already have your PSP in tow or if you're playing at home, then of course you should have a few memory sticks loaded with your favorite tunes on hand. You could substitute your PSP for your iPod mini when you hit the road but don't give the mini away. The PSP's a decent audio player, but you can't strap it to your shoulder and listen to it when you're jogging. Keep your small digital audio player handy for activities that require more portability.

Furthermore, Sony doesn't include software with the PSP to convert your CDs to the ATRAC3plus format. To convert CDs to that format, you'll have to download Sony's Connect audio software from musicstore.connect.com. Connect is a portal to Sony's online music store, where you can buy ATRAC3plus audio tracks for 99 cents a pop, er, song. You can also use the software to record your CD tracks as

ATRAC3plus files or convert your MP3s to Sony's format. We'd rather not do that however, as we've already saved our entire music library in three formats as it is, and we don't want to do it again!

Having said that, we loaded some MP3s onto a Memory Stick and gave them a listen. The PSP is a decent audio player, as it turns out. It's not noticeably better than a digital audio player from, say, iRiver (www.iriver.com) or Creative Labs (www.creative.com), but it's not worse either, sound-quality-wise. You use the PSP's game buttons to control the audio functions (Play, Rewind, Next Track, etc.), and you can choose from one of four preset equalizer settings. The PSP has pretty basic audio functionality, but we'd miss it if it wasn't there.

Smile, Please

The PSP's photo album is something digital photo fans will appreciate. It's pretty cool that you can load a few JPEGs (Joint Photographic Experts Group) on a Memory Stick and show them off to friends and family between rounds of game playing and movie watching.

You can view the photos in Normal or Zoom mode. Normal mode doesn't quite fill the screen, so you'll see a couple of vertical gray sidebars on either side of the photo. In Zoom mode, the edges of the picture are slightly cropped but it fills the PSP's screen. We like the Zoom mode better because it makes the photos look a little sharper. Speaking of which, don't expect the photo quality to be on-par with a shiny 4 x 6 photo straight from the lab. The PSP's screen is good but not quite that good.

You can rotate pictures, as well as zoom in and out of an image, and you can create a slideshow with a couple of button presses. We wished we could set a photo as the PSP's background image, but unfortunately that doesn't seem to be an option. But we like the PSP's photo album capability.

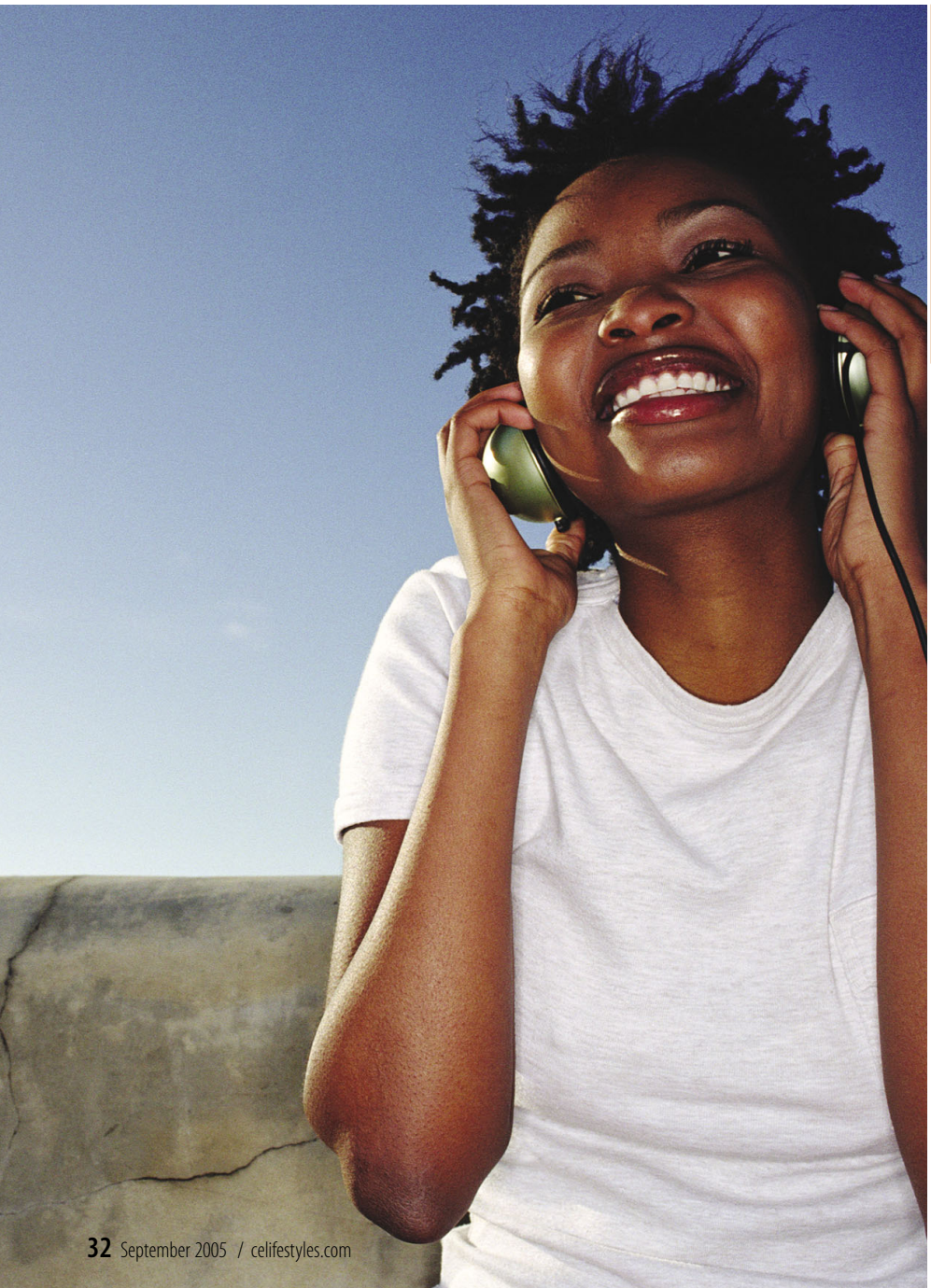
Share The Fun

Clearly, the PSP appeals mostly to gamers, and that's no surprise given how fun it is to play. But the PSP is one of the few devices that really is fun for the whole family, gamers or not. Most people would love to watch a feature film wherever they go. And the PSP's ability to serve in a pinch as an audio player and portable digital photo album is also compelling. It's a great way to keep the young ones occupied when out and about, and it's the perfect travel accessory. Just try not to fight over it with the fellas too much.

BY MICHAEL SWEET

Media Players Head-To-Head

Music & Video, Just The Way You Like



Playing music used to be so simple. You would pop a CD in the CD player (or tape in the cassette deck or—remember when?—an album on the record player), press a button, and listen as music flowed from your living room speakers. The same went for movies; you'd slide a VHS tape into the VCR or plop a DVD into the DVD player's tray and simply press Play to watch your favorite film.

But in the age of digital media, enjoying music and video is a lot more complicated than it used to be, even though the media quality has become significantly better. Thanks to our PCs, we can play music and watch videos and DVDs with excellent audio and video. But to make the most of the high-quality sounds and visuals our computers can provide, we must think about more than just putting the media into a player and pressing a button; we have to also think about what software will provide us with the best listening and visual experience. This is where media players come in.

Media players are software you install on your PC that let you play multimedia content, such as music files and video clips. You have numerous options from

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which to choose, and each has unique characteristics that will enhance your experience. Read on to learn more about what abilities media players have, see how they can work with your portable media devices, and decide which features and player are right for you.

Media Player Features

Finding your ideal media player will be determined in large part by what you'll be using the media player for. When you get home from a long day of college classes or work and want to take your mind off the day's stressors, you may want to listen to your favorite tunes or watch the latest music videos. But after being gone all day, you probably don't want to take time to sort through your pile of CDs to find your favorite mix. With a media player, you can listen to music right from your computer and create organized playlists or download new songs and videos to your PC, all without getting up from your chair. Media players also let you listen to CDs, watch movie trailers, and transfer music to a portable media player. Let's take a more in-depth look at some of the most widely used features of today's popular media players.

Winamp 5 lets you easily organize and play your music and video files in its full-featured media library.

RealPlayer's Music Guide lets you search by genre and artist to help you quickly find the music you are looking for.

Play music. One of the most basic yet important features of any media player is its ability to play music files. As the average PC hard drive's size grows, and as computer speakers sound richer with each new model, it's increasingly easy and desirable to store and listen to music collections on a computer.

One popular player with impressive audio file capabilities is the RealPlayer 10 (free; www.real.com) by RealNetworks, a pioneer in Internet audio. This player can handle a large range of audio and video file formats. In fact, RealPlayer claims it can play all the major music formats, including Real, MP3, QuickTime MPEG-4 (Moving Picture Experts Group-4), and WMA (Windows Media Audio), to name a few, as well as any music bought through every major online music store.

Rip and burn CDs. On a related note (bad pun intended!), media players often include the ability to rip and burn CDs. In other words, they make it easy for you to copy music from your audio CD, store it on your computer, and then copy the data to another CD. Take Nullsoft's Winamp 5 Pro ($14.95; www.winamp.com), for example. This software lets you copy your CDs to your hard drive in MP3 format and then burn that data to blank discs at speeds of up to 48 times the playing speed.

Download new music. If you're tired of your CDs and want to listen to and possibly buy some new songs, media players can also help you with that. Several media players let you listen to online radio stations by clicking a link from within the player. They also feature online stores that let you download music for a fee, and some of them let you transfer those tunes to your portable media players.

Windows Media Player 10 (free; www.microsoft.com) gives you a wide variety of options for listening to your tunes. You can listen to almost any radio station or type of music you want. In WMP's Digital Media Mall, you can purchase music downloads, sign up for a subscription service, or rent movies from services such as Napster, CinemaNow, and Court TV.

Organize your files. We strive to keep our homes neat and tidy, so it's second nature to want to keep our music organized, too, but with large collections, it's sometimes difficult and overwhelming. Most media players have features that make organization easier. When you download music files, often those files come with information tags that help you categorize the music; you can organize based on factors including the album, artist, genre, and song title.

Apple's iTunes digital jukebox (free; www.apple.com/itunes) shows just how easy it can be to listen to thousands of tunes. The easy-to-use interface makes it a snap to create playlists, either manually or with the Smart Playlists feature, which organizes your tunes using almost any criteria you desire, such as songs you have listened to repeatedly in the past month.

Play high-quality video. Media players also play video, whether it's a music video, movie trailer, news clip, or sports highlight. For playing video, we like Apple's QuickTime 7 (free; www.quicktime.com), the latest version of the player, which runs on both Macs and PCs (as of press time, the PC version was a preview). QuickTime uses a new video compression technology (called H.264) that makes it easier to transmit files over the Internet, and it tightly compresses files without deteriorating their quality. (We all know how much quality we have to give up for size.) If you want a more robust version of QuickTime, you can purchase the $29.99 QuickTime 6 Pro for Windows (version 7 expected out soon, but no specific date was available at press time), which offers full-screen viewing, video editing, and other advanced video features that turn your PC into a virtual television.

Sync with portable media devices. With so many people taking their multimedia files with them, it is important to look for a media player that syncs with your portable media device. For example, if you have a Rio Carbon (starting at $199.99; www.rioaudio.com), you will use WMP's Sync feature to copy files and folders to and from your PC.

QuickTime works well for playing high-quality video.

(And if you don't have a Carbon, the Plays For Sure Web site [www.playsforsure.com] lists more than 60 devices that use Windows Media Player as their player of choice.)

Of course, there are players other than WMP that you may be able to use with your device. RealPlayer lets you download to a wide range of portable media devices, including Apple's iPod and some palmOne PDAs, and Verizon customers use QuickTime to receive video messages on their getFLIX-enabled phones.

Which Player Is Best For You?

Determining which media player you should use with your devices depends on what you primarily want to use it for, but when deciding, you should also consider which Web sites you visit most. Because there is no clearly dominant media player in terms of market share, Web sites often offer content that plays in RealPlayer, Windows Media Player, and QuickTime.

To decide which one is best for you, take stock of what devices you have (or would like to have) and which Web sites you visit often and then experiment with each player's features through online demos or free downloads to find which interface and features you prefer.

The next time you come home after a long day and just want to relax, you'll only be a couple clicks away from the perfect playlist or latest videos to help you escape your long day.

BY HEIDI V. ANDERSON

Our Favorite Media Player

We took a look at a half-dozen media players to determine our favorite, and the winner is RealPlayer. Deciding on the "best" media player strongly depends upon what features matter most to you. You may love the Windows Media Player interface, but if you have an iPod and want to transfer music from your computer to your iPod, Windows Media Player isn't going to work for you. So, while we praise QuickTime for its crisp video playback and Windows Media Player for its numerous features, our best media player vote goes to RealPlayer for its all-encompassing file compatibility, portable device interaction, and intuitive interface.

Should You Pay To Play?

Everyone loves a bargain, and the free media players we cover in this story are perfect examples of great deals. But true audio- and videophiles can experience even more, if they're willing to pay a small fee. For example, MSN Radio Plus ($29.99 per year or $4.99 per month), available through Windows Media Player, serves up commercial-free Internet radio. RealPlayer with SuperPass ($12.99 per month) comes with advanced CD-burning features and exclusive programming, including news, sports, and entertainment. And QuickTime 7 Pro ($29.95) offers advanced video-editing features and full-screen movie watching.

More Audio. More Video.

Hear Sound All Around

In More Rooms.

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Satellite Radio

Your Bit Of Blue Sky

Satellite radio has garnered attention in the last few years, acquiring millions of subscribers, snaring shock jocks, and announcing deals with auto manufacturers. It emerged in the 1990s, when the FCC licensed two companies to broadcast on previously unused frequencies. Known today as XM (www.xmradio.com) and SIRIUS (www.sirius.com), the services went live in 2001 and 2003, respectively. Both providers promise essentially the same thing: more than 140 dedicated channels, mostly commercial-free, with nationwide broadcast coverage and stations narrowly tailored to specific interests. In theory, you can spend just under 50 cents per day and avoid the incessant advertising and limited choices plaguing terrestrial radio.

In the satellite world, you can choose from more than 60 music channels tailored to limited genres: "Jazz Café" for your monthly dinner party or "Kids Stuff" when you watch your niece for your sister. Satellite services provide diverse and targeted programming that commercial broadcast radio can't afford. Of course, you pay for the privilege, the radios themselves cost more, and the two satellite systems aren't generally compatible (though some dual standards are emerging).

Listening Options

XM and Sirius suffer similar limitations: The satellite footprints cover only the continental United States, tall buildings or dense foliage can interrupt signals (terrestrial transmitters dole out signals in urban areas full of tall buildings), and you need a southern-facing view for the antenna. Unlike analog broadcasts, digital audio delivers a full signal or nothing. When analog signals weaken, you still get a signal, albeit of lower quality. Digital (including satellite) signals either have the strength for a full signal or they don't, in which case you don't hear anything.

Satellite Spotlight

Alpine SAT Ready IVA-D310

$1,500

www.alpine-usa.com

The SAT Ready standard (recently available in some auto products) works with either XM or SIRIUS services. Alpine's multimedia display goes much further; it includes a built-in DVD/CD player and is compatible with most GPS navigation systems.

Tivoli SIRIUS Home Table Radio

$299.99

www.tivoliaudio.com

Combining old-fashioned styling and modern satellite technology, Tivoli's Home Table Radio also includes an AM/FM tuner, a large and bright display, and an alarm clock.

Kenwood SIRIUS DT-7000S

$299.95

www.kenwoodusa.com

Kenwood's home stereo tuner has attractive styling, display space for song and channel information, high-quality digital audio outputs, and a remote control. All you need is a stereo system and a spot for that south-facing antenna.

Delphi XM MyFi

$299.99

www.shopdelphi.com

Only a few handheld radios have hit the market, and the XM's MyFi is the niche's first and last word so far. It's iPod-sized, records five hours of programming, and can transmit to any FM radio when it's time to take off the headphones.

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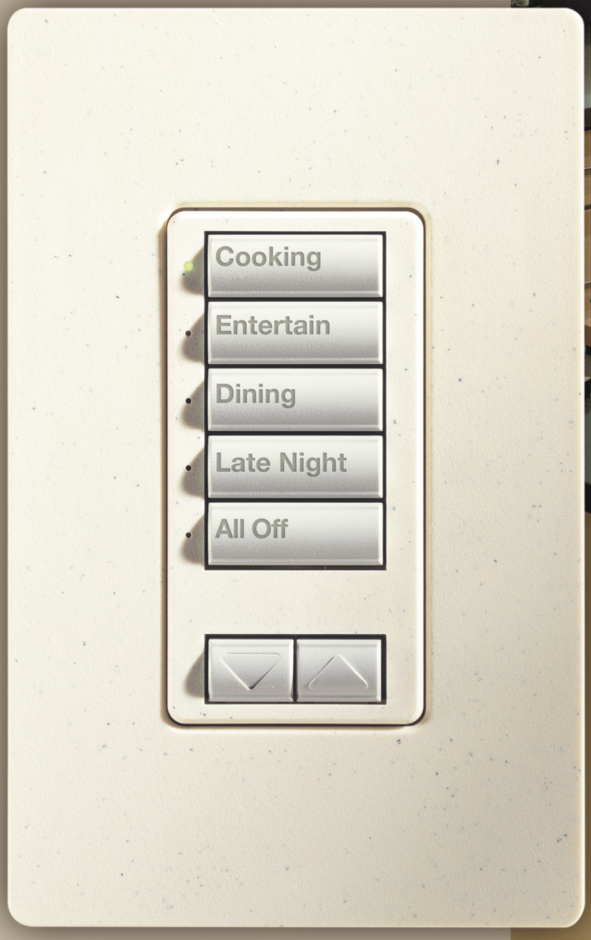

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Subscription Specifics

XM
www.xmradio.com

XM costs $12.95 a month for the first device ($6.99 a month for subsequent receivers), with multiyear discounts and small-business pricing ($27.95 per month). XM radio boasts over 4 million subscribers and offers 153 channels including:

- 67 music channels (organized into 13 genres)
- 12 news channels (including ABC, PRI, CNN, BBC, and Fox)
- 17 talk channels (from all over the perspective spectrum)
- Two kids' channels
- "Artist Confidential" sessions, concert broadcasts, and live performances
- Traffic and weather channels for 21 metro areas
- 32 college and pro sports channels (including all Major League Baseball and NASCAR)

SIRIUS
www.sirius.com

SIRIUS costs $12.95 a month for a single receiver and an extra $6.99 a month for additional radios, or $499.99 for a single device, one-time subscription. Small business pricing is $24.99 a month. Sirius claims around 1.5 million subscribers and offers 143 channels including:

- 66 music channels (in nine categories)
- 13 news channels (from NPR, CNBC, CNN, BBC, and Fox)
- 25 talk and entertainment channels (including political, spiritual, lifestyle, and Spanish language programming)
- Several unique channels including Martha Stewart LIVING, Radio Margaritaville, and Elvis Radio
- Live concerts and interviews
- Traffic and weather for 20 major cities
- 28 college and pro sports channels (including all NFL games)

How do you choose? See our "Subscription Specifics" sidebar for details, but XM and Sirius each feature about 150 channels with roughly 65 dedicated to music. You'll find "decades" ('60s, '70s, '80s), Folk, Country, Jazz, Rock, and Classical channels. Regardless of which service you opt for, you'll have an extensive selection of news, talk, and weather; exclusive live performances; and artist forums. Don't look for a price break: You'll pay $12.95 a month for a single receiver, with a $6.99 monthly charge for additional units. With either service, you can find multiyear discounts and small business licensing.

Little separates the services. SIRIUS has NPR exclusively (XM offers PRI), and XM has more dedicated children's programming. Football fans will prefer SIRIUS' complete NFL coverage, but golfers will appreciate PGA coverage on XM. XM and Sirius both satisfy liberal leanings with Air America, the progressive talk network highlighting Al Franken and Janeane Garofalo. Not your cup of tea? XM gives voice to conservatives with America Right, and Sirius features Sirius Patriot and Sirius Right (which it balances with Sirius Left).

The services have similar product catalogs, from several manufacturers, but there are differences. We organize radios into several categories: portables, car receivers, home stereo components, and standalone tabletops or "boom boxes." Our "Satellite Spotlight" sidebar highlights some leading offerings. Each provider's Web site has a product catalog; browse the listings to find prices and details for the various categories.

Portable receivers. These devices receive satellite signals and output them to car or home stereos. They don't play music independently but bring satellite radio to you. SIRIUS has a dozen models. XM has half as many. Prices range from $99 to $169, and most include displays for viewing song and artist info, built-in FM transmitters for tuning in wirelessly, and adapter kits to make integration with car and home systems easier.

Car stereos. We've seen a number of factory or retail car stereos with built-in XM or SIRIUS support. Hyundai is including XM radio as standard in all 2006 models. Models with built-in tuners don't need additional hardware: Activate the system and listen. Others ("satellite ready") need a tuner but are equipped to control the radio and display broadcast information directly from the stereo's face. Prices vary, from $150 to $2,400, not including installation, but the convenience is hard to beat if you spend lots of time in the car.

Home stereo components. These devices are stationary but normally offer more features and better sound. You'll pay from $250 to $2,000. With digital audio outputs and more extensive display options, home stereo components are a good option for listeners more concerned about audio quality than portability.

Standalone radios. Great for small rooms, these radios often combine multiple functions (CD playback, FM/AM reception) in a small space. Selection is limited, but prices are consistent: about $200 to $300. Several portable units (including XM's SKYFi) also have optional speaker or docking accessories turning receivers into "boom-box" style portables.

What's Right For You?

The best service and radio equipment depend on how you listen and what you listen to. Both SIRIUS and XM have similar material throughout the station lineup. Unless you have specific programming preferences, let the radio lead the way. Decide which model has the features, interface, and price you want. Then subscribe to the appropriate service and learn to enjoy radio listening again.

BY GREGORY ANDERSON

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tips Tame Wild Volume Levels

1 Consider The Source

Start with high-quality, digitally generated MP3 files directly from a computer's CD-ROM drive. Creating good-sounding digital music by plugging a separate CD player into a computer sound card's input jack can be tricky. If the file you've downloaded has audible background hiss or crackling distortion, try to download a different one. Remember, you can boost the volume of a quiet file, but you'll also boost the recorded background noise; you can't make a good CD from a bad MP3 file.

2 Take It To The Limit

If you want to boost the quiet passages of your songs without blowing out your eardrums during the louder parts, consider using an audio limiter program. Limiting increases any hiss or static that's already on the recording. It may make the recording sound noisier, as though it's being played in a room full of people talking. Applied judiciously, the limiter smooths out changes in loudness and makes older recordings sound fuller. Some CD recording programs, such as Nero 6 Ultra ($69.99; www.nero.com), include limiting applications, but many others support plug-ins that adjust and balance volume, such as Volume Logic ($19.95; www.octiv.com).

3 What's Normal?

Many CD burning programs, such as Easy Media Creator ($99.95; www.roxio.com), have "Normalize" features. This helps keep each track at a volume level similar to what you hear on CDs. It works only to the extent that peak levels correspond to loudness. If your program's normalizing feature only looks at peaks, it will make quiet songs with loud passages quieter. The program notes the loud passages and reacts as though it's a loud song and turns down the volume. Some normalizers look at average volume, but this may result in the opposite problem. Most of a quiet song will be boosted to a louder level, but a short loud passage will be ear-splitting. If you're using normalize, listen to make sure you've really made an improvement.

4 Match Your Mixes

It's great to have different music on the same CD. Choosing songs from the same genre and time period, though, helps ensure the songs match each other in volume. In general, newer music sounds louder. Although CDs haven't changed, pop music producers have used increasingly sophisticated technologies to make the songs sound louder, usually by reducing the strength of the loudest peaks so the average volume can be increased. Choosing songs from the same era will keep you from noticing the volume differences.

5 The Human Touch

If you use a program to automatically match your CD track volume levels to each other, don't expect magic. It's difficult for software to reliably tell a loud song from a quiet one. However, most programs also let you manually tweak each song. Listen to the end of each song and the beginning of the following song and listen for a change in volume. As you match levels, pay attention to whether a change in volume level is appropriate. CDs with interesting mixes exploit contrasts between songs; don't destroy them unless they're distracting.

BY JOE BELL

"When paired with a suitably high-end A/V receiver, the RBH CT-MAX will rock your home theater to its foundations."
- Steve Guttenberg, *c|net.com*

In either stereo or multichannel modes, the RBH excelled at producing a cleanly defined soundstage, with imaging uncluttered by any hint of a box or multiple drivers…The result is that the Compact Theater convincingly disappears as a sound source.
-Neil Gader, *The Perfect Vision Magazine*

MS-8.1

With its die-cast aluminum construction and aluminum woofers, the RBH CT-MAX delivers "foundation rocking" performance, yet won't rock your budget to its foundations.

RBH's Compact Theater systems offer the unparalleled value and incomparable attention to detail which have come to be expected from RBH.

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Portable Power

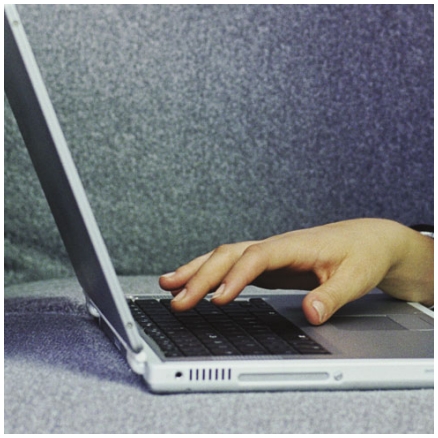
Here's What to Look For In Laptops

When you're looking at a laptop, don't think computer. Think about watching a DVD on a boring plane flight or catching up on your favorite TV shows in a crowded airport terminal. Think about organizing and editing all of those digital photos you take on vacation while you're still *on* vacation. Think about accessing your email and message boards while sipping java at the local coffee shop and all without plugging in a single wire. No other CE product does so much for so little. Whether you need an ultra-portable yet powerful device to keep up with work on the road or are looking to replace a desktop system, there's a laptop out there that meets your needs.

Trendspotting

We all know laptops are getting sleeker and faster, but there are a few hot technologies you need to know about when comparing the latest models.

One of the most important is Intel's Centrino brand, which most people think is a type of processor. In reality, Centrino is a marketing term used to



tell customers that a laptop contains three technologies: Intel's Pentium M processor, a special low-power Intel motherboard, and Intel-powered integrated Wi-Fi hardware for wireless Internet connectivity. The Pentium M is superior to the less expensive Pentium 4 chip for laptop use because it runs faster and cooler, using far less power to conserve battery life. Integrated wireless functionality means you can access the Internet from nearly every hotel and coffee shop in America, all without having to buy or muck around with additional hardware.

AMD has a similar theme going in the form of its AMD Turion 64 Mobile Technology. Notebooks equipped with this have AMD's 64-bit processor, integrated wireless networking, and power-saving technology, among other enhancements. The 64-bit support will be a big deal down the road when there are operating systems and applications designed to support it, but for now it has few advantages over a 32-bit technology, such as the Pentium M.

There are many things to watch out for on the wireless front. In the past it was all about Wi-Fi, which lets you wirelessly connect at any hotel, airport, or coffee house with a hotspot, but current and upcoming laptops sport new technology that lets you access the 'Net from practically any place that gets a cell phone signal. Know what type of wireless service is available in your area, at a price you're comfortable with, before spending extra money on a computer that supports it.

Another hot trend with notebooks is to design them around Windows XP Media Center Edition, Microsoft's OS that is custom-tailored for multimedia applications, such as recording and playing back TV programs. (If you have the August 2005 *CE Lifestyles* handy,

read about recording and playing back content from your TV on your PC in "TV On Your PC" on page 42.) Toshiba's Qosmio laptops ($1,799 and up; www.toshiba.com) are among the newest to take advantage of this special OS. The notebooks have integrated TV tuners, DVD recorders, and a technology that cleans up video so it looks better than video normally does on an LCD.

Finally, instant-on laptops that bypass Windows to play CDs, MP3s, DVDs, or other multimedia files also are increasing in popularity. One of the most interesting is HP's Pavilion dv1000 ($799 and up; www.hp.com), a slim and trim Windows PC that has instant-on support for nearly every type of multimedia, and it comes with a small remote control.

The Crystal Ball

So what can we expect from future laptops? Battery life may improve dramatically thanks to fuel cell technology. Hard drives are on track to have much higher capacities and run at much higher speeds, due mainly to a new perpendicular recording technology that lets hard drive manufacturers squeeze up to 10 times the amount of data into the same amount of physical space. Fujitsu, Hitachi, and other companies are promising 200GB laptop hard drives by 2007.

The next version of Windows, code-named Longhorn, supports at least one new piece of technology of interest to laptop users: auxiliary displays. These small screens are installed on the outside of a laptop's case so users can easily access multimedia controls and other functions even when the computer is closed or turned off.

What we probably won't see is a move to ever-smaller laptops because every reduction in size forces displays and keyboards to shrink, as well. OLED (Organic Light-Emitting Diode) screens that fold up could solve screen size problems, and several companies have also developed virtual keyboards that use light to project a full-sized keyboard onto any flat surface, but these types of innovations are still pretty far away. For now, the fast performance, long battery life, and fantastic multimedia playback capabilities that current laptops offer will have to suffice. ce

BY TRACY BAKER

For The Techie Diva: Dream Laptop

Need a laptop that can do anything? They exist. Forget about portability, though, and expect to pay a premium for the large displays, fast video cards, and loads of top-notch hardware. Take a look at these two firebreathers:

Dell XPS Gen 2
$2,749 and up
www.dell.com

Dell is among the first to offer the new, high-capacity 100GB laptop hard drives that spin at 7,200 revolutions per minute in its Dell XPS Gen 2, but the technical highlights don't stop there. We configured a system with a 2.13GHz Pentium M processor, a TV tuner card, 2GB of super-fast memory, a dual-layer DVD burner, and NVIDIA's fastest laptop video chip: the 256MB GeForce Go 6800 Ultra. The result? A laptop with a 17-inch 1,920 x 1,200 screen that is capable of leaving most high-end desktop systems in the dust in terms of gaming, multimedia, and office application performance. Now if only someone would front us the $4,095 purchase price . . .

Voodoo Envy u:703
$4,050 and up
www.voodoopc.com

Voodoo doesn't care about battery life, weight, price, or any other object when it comes to the Envy u:703. Fully tricked out this 13-pound (yes, you read that right) laptop will set you back nearly $5,500, but you get plenty of bang for your buck. Options include a 17-inch widescreen LCD with a native resolution of 1,900 x 1,200, 2GB of some of the fastest memory on the planet, a pair of zippy hard drives, and two dual-layer DVD burners. The capper, though, is the ultra-fast ATO Mobility Radeon x800 video card equipped with 256MB of dedicated memory, which makes everything from the latest games to DVDs buttery smooth.

It's the little touches that make this laptop stand out from the crowd, as long as you're willing to pay for exclusivity. You can choose from 10 case colors when designing the system, ranging from pearl white and powder pink to baby blue and pearl orange, and for an extra $81, Voodoo will paint your mouse the same color. An extra $200 buys you one of six "her" personal tattoos for the top of the case, giving new meaning to the term "sticker shock." At least the company throws in a free T-shirt. ●

Apple Alternatives

If you need access to all of the hottest software, nothing is better than a PC, but for most of the things people typically need a computer for (office work, editing photos, accessing the Internet, and making digital movies), Apple laptops are a great alternative. Here's what you need to know about the current lineup:

iBook G4
$999 to $1,499
www.apple.com

If you're looking for something small, sleek, and inexpensive, you could do much worse than the iBook G4. Current models come with Mac OS X Tiger, Apple's hot new operating system, and all of them have integrated wireless Internet hardware. Size depends on the model you order: They're all 1.35 inches thick, but the model with the 12.1 inch screen weighs only 4.9 pounds, while the larger model with the 14.1 inch screen weighs 5.9 pounds.

PowerBook G4
$1,499 to $2,699
www.apple.com

The PowerBook G4 is Apple's flagship laptop line, equipped with the company's fastest PowerPC processors and sporting displays up to 17 inches wide. As with the iBook, wireless hardware is built in, and the largest model weighs only 6.9 pounds. All of these notebooks also have integrated USB 2.0 and FireWire ports, so connecting nearly any digital camera or digital camcorder is a snap. ●

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Representative home cinema environment provided by Bradford Wells + Associates, Los Angeles, CA.

Best Laptops For Women

Pretty Is As Pretty Does: We Want Performance

What's more important in a laptop: good looks or performance? According to a survey conducted jointly by WITI (Women in Technology International), IDC, and Intel, women want performance.

Because mobile technology affords us the freedom to work where we want, when we want—at least in theory—it's not surprising that 57% of the women surveyed said that their laptops are the "most important" technology that they use, and 89% say they use their laptops "regularly."

Does that mean that the style and color of a laptop are meaningless? No, but this survey suggests that appealing to a sense of style isn't sufficient; manufacturers have to deliver features and functions that fit their female customers' productivity needs and lifestyles. Wrapping up all that technology in an attractive package is a bonus. (See the "Laptop Or Handbag" sidebar.)

The good news for women is that it's easy to customize a laptop to meet your needs, as we'll show you.

Research & Customize

The WITI survey also reported that almost one-third of women perform online research when choosing a laptop. That's an excellent approach to take because the Web sites of major notebook makers let you peruse all of their standard and optional features and then order a custom-built product. And you can usually find money-saving deals at these sites, such as rebates, free shipping, and discounted or free accessories or software. That said, here are companies and models to start with as you consider price, features, and portability.

IBM ThinkPad X41

Starts at $1,999
www.ibm.com/thinkpad

The new ThinkPad X41 tablet notebook, part of IBM's X40 series, is the ultimate in portability—the lightest tablet of its size on the market.

Starting at a base price of $1,999, this customizable model has an impressive set of basic features. Those include Windows XP Pro Tablet Edition, which can run any WinXP-compatible application, and the Digitizer Pen, with which

you can make handwritten notes and sketches right on the tablet's screen. Or, use it to edit open documents. Store the pen, which never needs to be recharged, in the side of the tablet's palm rest.

The X41's 12.1-inch screen swivels on a hinge, so you can fold it back at a 180-degree angle, allowing you to hold the tablet like a clipboard or notepad as you write with the digital pen.

The X41 has a full-sized keyboard, with standard buttons and the TrackPoint pointing device, yet the entire tablet starts at a mere 3.5 pounds and is 1.14 inches thick. The battery should run for more than six hours between charges.

Of all the optional features, we like the Integrated Fingerprint Reader the best, especially for women who use their

Handbag Or Laptop?

At first glance, you may not recognize the X2 StyleBook or the Tulip E-Go as laptops. Their highly stylized designs scream "fashion accessory," not computing power tool. But flip open these laptops, designed specifically for women, and you'll see their beauty isn't just skin deep.

The StyleBook 2000 (www.x2usa.com) is the first in X2's new line of notebooks. Starting at a base price of $1,199, the StyleBook gives you a choice between the Intel Pentium M or Celeron M processor running WinXP with Service Pack 2. Other key features include a minimum 40GB hard drive, a DVD/CD-RW or DVD+/-RW drive, three-in-one media card reader, type II PC card slot, two USB 2.0 ports, a FireWire connection, and a 12.1-inch screen.

For maximum mobility, the StyleBook has integrated Wi-Fi Wireless LAN and a 56Kbps modem. At 3.9 pounds, the notebook is just 1.2-inches thick when closed.

Now, for the fun part: You can choose a StyleBook in pastel green or blue, pink, piano white, metallic black, or silver. Each of those colors is also available in a matching carrying bag made of your choice of leather, suede, microfiber, or faux crocodile. The bags have a special protective compartment to store the StyleBook and are also roomy enough to double as a purse.

For now, we'll have to take Tulip's word about the E-Go (short for "easy going") because the laptop isn't scheduled for release in the United States until January 2006, following a fall debut in Europe. But the Web site (www.tulip-ego.com) promises some heavy-duty features.

Its AMD Turion 64 processor will power a 100GB hard drive, 1,024MB of memory, and a DVD-RW drive. You can expand its capabilities via its PC card slot and four USB 2.0 ports. (Staying true to its stylish nature, all the ports are hidden by sliding doors, and the PC card is kept out of sight by the cover.) You'll stay connected with integrated wireless LAN and Bluetooth technologies, and the built-in Web cam will give you flexibility in doing so.

The battery yields about four hours of operation, but Tulip reportedly will offer a nifty power-saving feature: You can play CDs without powering on the laptop.

We don't know yet how thick or heavy the E-Go will be, nor are we sure of its suggested retail price, but we do know it will have a 12.1-in screen. And don't forget those eye-popping changeable covers, designed by the Dutch agency Marcel van Galen. ●

A Lightweight Vaio

The new Sony Vaio VGN-T350 merits mention here because it's so stylish and sleek. Actually, there are two models: the VGN-T350P/S and the VGN-T350P/T. The base price for both is $2,049.99, and each is powered by the low-voltage Intel Pentium M processor. The integrated WWAN (wireless wide-area network) technology allows for Internet access just about anywhere you can use a cell phone, automatically linking you to the Cingular Wireless EDGE Network.

Both models are available in an eye-catching midnight blue in retail stores, plus burgundy and silver. The latter color is available exclusively online (www.sonystyle.com). In addition to their good looks, these new Vaios are conveniently compact yet powerful. They weigh just 3.1 pounds, sport a 10.6-inch display, and run up to 8.5 hours between battery charges. ●

laptops extensively away from the office or home. This function, which is built into the screen's rim, works in both tablet and notebook mode. With the help of the IBM Client Security Password Manager application, you can bypass your password and gain access to your laptop by pressing your finger on the reader. But you can always choose to use passwords, as well.

Wi-Fi wireless and Bluetooth technologies are other optional features. In fact, you can choose to have the Wi-Fi built into the X41 or make the notebook upgradeable to Wi-Fi by way of a mini PCI adapter. Either way, you'll appreciate the standard UltraConnect antenna, built in to the cover to receive wireless signals. For those times when you use the notebook at your desk, you can buy the ThinkPad X4 Dock.

The X41 is available only in black with accent colors.

Toshiba libretto U100

Starting at $2,099
www.toshibadirect.com

If the Toshiba libretto U100 were any smaller, you might confuse it with a PDA. This mini notebook weighs a mere 2.1 pounds and is small enough (1.17 x 8.27 x 6.50 inches; HxWxD) to fit into just about any bag.

If the Toshiba libretto U100 were any smaller, you might confuse it with a PDA.

But don't let its tiny size deceive you—it's loaded with goodies that cater to those who work on the road. For starters, it comes with WinXP Pro, MS Works, and MS Office OneNote and is powered by the Intel Pentium M Processor Ultra Low Voltage 753, a power-saving chip that will extend the life of your battery between charges. Generally, the U100's battery will give you five hours of life at a time.

The 60GB hard drive and 512MB of memory gives you plenty of storage, and you can get the optional DVD dock, a DVD burner compatible with multiple CD and DVD formats. Other standard features include an 84-key keyboard, 56K modem, two USB 2.0 ports, an SD card slot, a FireWire port for high-speed data transfer, wireless LAN connectivity, and integrated Bluetooth technology.

Like the ThinkPad X41, the U100 also has a fingerprint reader, part of the Toshiba EasyGuard design, for an extra level of protection for your data.

The downside to the U100's compact size is the 7.2-inch screen. That small display isn't for everyone, but for others it's only a minor concession in order to have such a portable, powerful machine.

The U100 begins at $2,099 and is available only in black.

Gateway M250S

Starts at $849.99
www.gateway.com

Not everyone needs a laptop as loaded as the ThinkPad or libretto.

Plenty of less-expensive models will undoubtedly meet your portable computing needs. For instance, the M250S from Gateway has a base price of $849.99 and gives you plenty of affordable features.

For starters, its Intel Celeron M Processor 360 powers the preinstalled WinXP Home Edition and MS Works 8.0. And you'll have plenty of memory and storage: 512MB of memory, a 40GB hard drive, six-in-one media card reader, and CD/DVD drive.

Need more memory or storage or the ability to connect to other devices? The M250S has one type II PC Card slot, three USB 2.0 ports, and a FireWire connection. And with its 56Kbps modem and integrated wireless networking adapter, you'll have multiple options for going online.

All these features are packaged neatly in a silver, 1.1-inch-thick notebook that weighs about five pounds. That includes a 14-inch-wide screen and full-sized keyboard with the EZ Pad Pointing Device.

Averatec 4200

Starting at $1,199.99
www.averatec.com

If Goldilocks were choosing a notebook, there's a good chance one of the four products in the Averatec 4200 series would appeal to her. You know—they're not too big, not too small, but just about right.

We looked at model AV4265-EH1, which is powered by an Intel Pentium M processor and comes with WinXP Home Edition preinstalled. It has an ample 80GB hard drive, 512MB of memory, a multiformat DVD burner, and a 56Kbps modem. It also sports three USB 2.0 ports, a type II PC Card slot, a four-in-one media card reader, a FireWire port, and built-in wireless LAN connectivity.

This model comes in jet blue, weighs 4.7 pounds, and has a 13.3-inch AveraBrite display with a full-sized keyboard. When folded, it's only 1.3 inches thick.

If Goldilocks were choosing a notebook, one of the four products in the Averatec 4200 series would appeal to her.

Even if one of the 4200 models doesn't quite meet your needs, a visit to the Averatec Web site is worth your time. For all the lip service we pay to performance features, such as wireless connectivity, one basic feature we might not be willing to budge on is screen size. Averatec knows this and thus categorizes all its laptops based on the screen size: 10-inch, 12-inch, 13-inch, and 15-inch. So if your laptop's display size is non-negotiable, you'll enjoy shopping at Averatec.

Prioritize Your Needs

It's stereotypical to assume all women want the same features on their laptops. An essential feature for you may be useless for your friend.

As we've demonstrated, however, you can customize a notebook to meet most, if not all, of your needs—and perhaps even stay within budget.

BY RACHEL DEROWITSCH

Laptop Buying Guide

You Can Always Get What You Want

Somebody, somewhere must decide to buy a laptop, wander into the nearest electronics store, and pick something because it's stylish. When it comes to a laptop computer, though, the inside is what really counts. Careful shopping is the way to make sure that the money you spend—whether it's just under $1,000 or more than $3,000—is really worth it.

The good news is that picking out the perfect laptop isn't difficult. As long as you approach your shopping trip with a few key decisions made and a budget that isn't too tight, you shouldn't have any problem finding something that suits your needs.

First things first, though: those needs. The single most important distinction to make is whether the laptop will be an extra computer or your only computer. If you're a mother of young children, for instance, you might be buying a laptop instead of a desktop computer. That way, you'll be able to write email in the living room, help the kids work on school reports while fixing dinner, or occasionally get some work done while you're waiting for a piano lesson to end. If you're an independent businesswoman, however, you might decide to buy a laptop computer just for business trips or meetings with clients, but use a more powerful desktop computer the rest of the time. In that case you won't need the notebook computer to work quite as hard—you'll just need it to be very portable.

Buying a laptop is always about weighing performance, price, and portability. Even if money is no object, you still have to find the right a balance of performance and portability. Let's face it: A laptop with a 17-inch monitor is always going to weigh more than a comparable one with a 13-inch monitor. It's bigger. If your notebook is a second computer, tip the scales more in the direction of portability over performance. A small, 12- or 13-inch screen is fine in the close quarters of an airplane cabin, and you'll be glad that it might only weigh six pounds.

However, if your laptop is the only screen you have to look at pictures from a vacation, you might wish the screen was three inches larger—even if the laptop were three pounds heavier. Whatever your situation, our buying guide will help you find the perfect match.

Features, Features

Next, think about the features you want. At a bare minimum, expect a headphone jack, microphone jack, Ethernet card, 56Kbps (kilobits per

second) modem, at least one PC Card slot, and at least one USB 2.0 port.

Floppy diskette drives are a thing of the past—too bulky and heavy. (Fortunately, small "thumb drives" that plug into the USB port are more convenient for transferring files.) Parallel ports for printers and serial ports for a mouse or PDA are also becoming optional. Again, the USB port is a better stand-in. Having multiple USB ports is preferable to having serial and parallel ports, unless you own a printer that only works with a parallel port.

Then there's the fun stuff. You'll need at least a CD-ROM drive for installing software, but the better laptops these days have a DVD drive. This may seem like an extravagance, but buy it if you can. Unless this is your only computer, though, a CD or DVD burner probably isn't necessary.

One other desirable feature is a built-in FireWire port. Also called IEEE 1394, for the standard it's based on, FireWire transfers large files from a digital video camera or a portable music device such as an iPod. If you don't have any devices that use FireWire, let your pocketbook make the decision. You can always add FireWire later via the PC Card slot.

Forgoing wireless capabilities trims a little off the cost of the notebook. But really, what's the point of having a laptop if you can't use the Internet at one of the growing number of cafes, airport lounges, and even parks that are Wi-Fi hot spots?

Nuts & Bolts

Once you know what you want your laptop to do, think about how *well* you want it to do what it does. The four main factors are CPU, memory, graphics card, and hard drive.

Of these, the CPU is the most important. Currently, Intel's top of the line chip for laptops is called Centrino. Its centerpiece is Intel's Pentium M processor, which was designed to run cooler and use less power than other processors. Centrino also incorporates wireless capability and some other things that are supposed to make it purr. If you do any video editing or the kids play computer games, you'll want Centrino. Even if you don't do either of those things, Centrino is still the best option if you can afford it. Your programs will run faster, and your battery will last longer. You'll also increase your chances that two years from now, you'll still be able to buy and run any kind of new software that you wish. If you're on a budget, though, the Intel Celeron M, also designed for mobile computing, is a less expensive option.

AMD also has a good, if less popular, line of microprocessors fine-tuned for mobile computers. This includes the economic Mobile AMD Sepron and the high-end Mobile AMD Athlon. The

What Women Want

Here are the top five features women should look for when buying a notebook PC. (And to see which notebooks we recommend for women, see "Best Laptops For Women" on page 48.)

1 Lightweight. If you have a desktop computer, choose something seven pounds or less and save the fancy (and heavy) features for your home PC.

2 Wireless capability. Even if you don't think you're the type to sit in a cafe and surf the Internet, save yourself a hassle six months from now and get the built-in wireless modem.

3 Entertainment options. At some point you're going to want to watch a movie—or your kids in the backseat are. Spring for the DVD drive and pick up an earphone adaptor so both kids can use their earphones at once.

4 Plenty of RAM. Always get more RAM than you think you'll need because adding more to a laptop is difficult. The more memory you have, the more applications you'll be able to run at once.

5 A good carrying case. Just because you can throw a laptop into your bag doesn't mean you should. Protect your investment with a sturdy case. There are dozens on the market that are created especially for women, allowing you to combine style with function. Or, if you're attached to a favorite shoulder bag, look for a padded insert to slide inside.

Shopping Tips

Get your hands on the goods. Manufacturers have mastered the art of letting you customize and order a computer online, and Web retailers offer compelling prices. But try to go to a local computer store to get a sense of the look and feel of the laptops you are considering. If the salesperson doesn't mind, stick one in your bag for a minute to see what eight pounds really feels like on your shoulder.

Don't get bamboozled about the weight. The specs for a notebook computer usually say something like "begins at six pounds." That may not include extra features such as the CD drive or even the battery. Make sure you know what the specified weight includes.

Read the warranty's fine print. Retailers like to offer warranties at the last moment, just when you're ready to be done. Make sure you understand exactly what the warranty includes before you buy it.

Don't forget the accessories. Two must-haves: an extra battery for that cross-country plane trip and a wireless infrared mouse for when your hand cramps up from the built-in pointing device.

manufacturer recommends the latter for anyone who does video editing, needs extra-long battery life, or just really likes to multitask.

Make sure the processor you choose is at least 300MHz, or you might have trouble running Windows XP. This shouldn't be a problem, however, because most CPU speeds now are measured in gigahertz. It would be hard to find a new laptop that can't handle applications such as word processing, Web browsing, email, money management, and minor photo editing.

One area not to skimp on is memory. Don't consider less than 256MB and buy more than you think you'll need. It seems like a lot, but 1GB of RAM is not a ridiculous amount if this will be your only computer. Lots of memory keeps your computer from crashing when you open email, several Web pages, a photo editor, and money-management software all at once. Buying RAM now won't cost that much more. Adding it later can be expensive, bothersome, or maybe impossible.

Most people will be content with the video card and sound card that comes with a laptop. Usually, this is an integrated video card that shares memory with the CPU. However, if anyone in your family is into gaming or does video editing, shop for a more expensive dedicated video card. Video cards are measured in RAM. The more RAM, the smoother and more efficiently graphics will run.

Last up is the hard drive. What you need varies based on whether this is your only computer. If it isn't, you can probably get away with 30GB. If it is, get at least double that. With a 60GB hard drive, you can store 5,000 songs and still have an ample 40GB left for software, digital photographs, and other documents.

The Final Touch

We know we said it's what's inside a laptop that counts, but it's also true that using a laptop is a hands-on experience. Unlike a desktop computer, where you can change the monitor or keyboard, you have to like the look and feel of your laptop. Only your eyes will be able to tell you whether a 14-inch screen is big enough; only your shoulder will be able to tell you if nine pounds is too heavy.

Play with some computers at the store or try out a couple that belong to friends. The deciding factor between two laptops may be something as simple as how well you like the pointing device that stands in for a mouse. Once you understand what's inside the laptop, though, you can make an educated decision based on the whole package.

BY S.D. HUNTER

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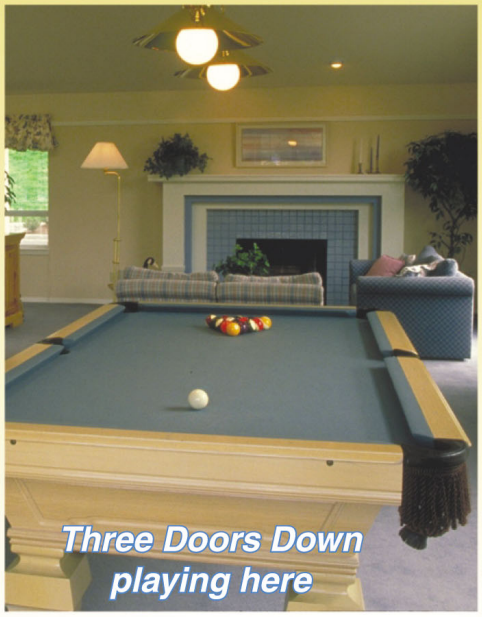

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You Can Take It With You

Best Accessories For Your Laptop

Truly mobile computing requires more than the perfect laptop. As with even the best outfits in our wardrobes, our notebook computers are nothing without the right accessories. Who among us hasn't groaned at the sight of a truly hideous laptop bag ruining a perfectly good ensemble? Or grudgingly massaged the sore muscles we earned as we bent our wrists and necks like crones to hear our tiny speakers, make use of a teeny touchpad, or look down into our laps at our screens? The trade-off for portability has been painful.

Fortunately, the end of those bulky-bagged, muscle-weary days is in sight. With fashion-friendly, ergonomic, and state-of-the-art aids for our portable computers readily available, we can now step onto planes, into coffee shops, and even head off-road without sacrificing fashion or form—and without maxing out our credit cards, either. We looked at laptop accessories in the following six categories—speakers, laptop bags, Web cams, USB flash drives, laptop docks, and optical mice—to see which products win the prize for best enhancing our portable computing lives.

BY NAOMI GRAYCHASE

Web Cams

Web cams are an excellent way for families to keep in touch. No matter how many miles are between you, an Internet connection and a Web cam can bring friendly faces home. To keep in touch with your road warrior, college student, or grandma on the other coast, we recommend the Logitech QuickCam for Notebooks Deluxe ($59.99; www.logitech.com) or the Macally Icecam ($39; www.macally.com). The QuickCam is only available for users running Windows XP; the Icecam is compatible with any Macintosh Powerbook with a built-in USB port, as well as with systems running Windows 98 and more recent OSes. Both are tiny, ultra-portable USB cameras. The QuickCam has a built-in microphone; the Icecam requires a separate mic. Of the two, the QuickCam's video quality is better, particularly in low-light settings. Both are easy to position and focus, and they work with most popular instant messaging software, such as AIM, Yahoo! Messenger, and iChatAV.

Laptop Bags

Until recently, toting a laptop meant carrying luggage. A little black dress is a must-have; a giant, black, laptop case is clearly a must-not. After years of not getting it, manufacturers have finally designed and produced bags that are durable, stylish, and as remarkably diverse as the women who buy them. We looked at bags in four categories: tote, sleeve, briefcase replacement, and fashion statement.

The Tote. Our favorite is The Tote from Acme Made ($264.99 to $299.99; www.acmemade.com), which produces sturdy, chic bags that a girl could fall in love with. Although the price tags can be a little steep, the hand-sewn, high-quality bags are worth every penny. The Tote comes in six colors and patterns and accommodates laptops that are smaller than 17 inches. It features a padded and lined computer pocket; a zippered accessory pocket; and enough room for several thick file folders, an optical mouse, a small purse, and a few other things. It's comfortable to carry and looks fantastic, too. Also in this category, we liked the Komen Microfiber Tote from Mobile Edge ($129.99; www.mobileedge.com). The bag was a bit large for our tastes—it's several inches larger than The Tote, but still only accommodates 15-inch computers—but its simple black and pink color scheme and its good intentions—10% of the proceeds from sales of this bag go to the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation (www.komen.org)—won us over.

Sleeve. The clear winner in the sleeve category was the Pinder THIN bag ($49; www.pinderbags.com). A satisfying mix between simple sleeve and basic bag, it comes in seven colors and three sizes, which can accommodate up to 17-inch computers. The Pinder THIN adequately protects laptops for a trip to class or to the corner coffee shop and for longer trips, can be tucked inside a briefcase, backpack, or carryon. We love the look and feel of this bag, and because Pinder guarantees its bags for life (and donates 5% of its net revenues to an admirable collection of charities), it's a purchase we can feel good about. The runner-up in this category was the Citra Envelope Computer Case from Casauri ($70 to $80; www.casauri.com). The four color choices were pleasing, and the water-resistant nylon made us feel a little less concerned about getting caught in the rain.

Briefcase replacements. Causari's Portfolio Valise from the Citra collection ($98) was our favorite briefcase replacement. That may be because it reminded us of a suitcase we had as a girl in the '70s or it may just be that its bountiful interior pockets and bold orange lining made us happy. Fully-padded and made of water-resistant nylon, it accommodates up to a 15-inch computer and its accoutrements. You'll have to be a bit of a risk-taker to walk this case into a boardroom, but for those in artistic fields—or students—this case is an excellent, professional-looking bag with flare.

Fashion statement. For the hip fashionista on a budget, we recommend the Mobile Edge Faux-Croc TechStyle Portfolio ($49.99). In eye-catching colors including pink, green, and yellow, the faux crocodile skin exterior is striking. You'll sacrifice some function to fashion as the case is not spacious—but it sure does look pretty. The Designer Slim from Acme Made ($149.99 to $174.99), which comes in 21 stain-resistant fabrics, is also too small to contain much more than your laptop, but this carefully crafted bag/sleeve hybrid is too cute to ignore.

Speakers

As MP3 junkies will attest, there are a million reasons to have good sound on your laptop. Unfortunately, the speakers built in to most laptops don't measure up for our favorite uses, such as listening to streaming audio and video or watching DVDs. Gamers and professionals who rely on the audio/video features of their laptops will agree—if you want good sound, you have to add on.

Our favorite portable speakers were released by Sony this spring. The Sony SRS-T10PC ($59.99; www.sonystyle.com) is sturdy and smart-looking and comes in two colors (black or white). The SRS-T10PC is smartly designed for portability, with a protective case and room to tuck the short USB cord into the back. It takes its power from the USB port, so there's no need for batteries. A slightly less expensive (and prettier) option is the Sony SRS-T33 ($39.99). This somewhat older, but nonetheless chic-looking speaker set comes in three colors (blue, pink, and silver) and offers Mega Bass sound.

The best buy for your budget are the Kensington PocketSpeakers ($49.99; www.kensington.com). Although the sound is not phenomenal, these lightweight speakers have a clamshell design and retractable cord, which makes them easy to fold up and take with you. There's no software required—just plug into your USB port and fill a room with sound, wherever you are.

If you're looking for affordable speakers that'll turn your laptop into a full-blown sound system, but that don't need to fit into your laptop bag, the SoundpaX Portable Speakers ($69; www.si-5.com) from Sonic Impact offer great sound quality. These cardboard speakers are remarkably lightweight and fold into a pyramid (19 x 13.5 x 12 inches; HxWxD). They come with their own nylon carrying case and a digital audio amp. They're perfect for parties, dorm rooms, camping trips, or tailgating.

Laptop Docks

Although laptops make our lives easier in so many ways, they may also be responsible for keeping chiropractors in business. The ways we bend, twist, and slouch when we work on portable computers send shivers up the spines of ergonomics experts everywhere.

If your laptop is your primary workstation, there are a couple of devices from Kensington that you should put at the top of your shopping list this fall.

The Kensington Portable Universal Docking Station ($129.99; www.kensington.com) is a lightweight, sleekly designed USB 2.0 port replicator with Ethernet. It lets you easily add seven ports to your laptop so that you can attach a keyboard, a monitor, a mouse, a printer, and other helpful devices to diminish the need to contort yourself as you're working. It's small enough to be portable, and it won't take up much space on your desktop or work space. Plug it into your laptop's USB port and you can create a comfortable desktop workstation. The docking station works only with Windows XP with Service Pack 1 or higher.

If you don't want to attach an entirely new monitor to your notebook PC, the Kensington Laptop Desktop USB 2.0 ($79.99) will give your laptop a comfortable, attractive home and let you adjust the height of the screen to achieve a more ergonomic set up. It fits 16-inch or smaller laptops and has a built-in USB 2.0 hub.

Of course, to use the Laptop Desktop, you'll need to attach a keyboard. We recommend the Kensington Keyboard for Life ($14.99), which can survive serious spills, or the Kensington SlimType Keyboard ($29.99), which is compatible with Windows 2000/XP and Mac OSes.

Optical Mice

If you curse your laptop computer's touchpad every time you use it, investing in the Logitech Cordless Mini Optical Mouse ($29.99) will be the best $30 you ever spend. Compatible with Mac OS X 10.12+, as well as Windows 98 and newer, all you need is a free USB port, the downloadable drivers, and you're on your way. When the mouse is not in use, you'll need to keep track of the wireless plug-and-play mini-receiver that plugs into your USB port, but it snaps into the bottom of the mouse for easy transport (and battery conservation), so that's not so hard. Compact, comfortable, and colorful (it comes in four colors), the Mini Optical Mouse is the best bet for mousing on the go.

For $20 more, the Macally BTMouseJr ($49) is also an excellent addition to your laptop, but with one caveat: You either need a built-in Bluetooth module, or you need to buy the Macally Bluetooth USB adapter separately ($39). If you have Bluetooth built-in, this device will definitely simplify your life. After inserting the included AA batteries, just pair the BTMouseJr with your laptop by pressing a button and moving it near your system. No software to download, no need to use up a USB port, and no extra parts to keep track of.

USB Flash Drives

In terms of transporting data, USB flash drives are to media storage what a MINI Cooper/Humvee hybrid would be to cars. They come in zippy packages but are also nearly indestructible.

Small enough to fit on your key chain, the Iomega Micro Mini USB drive (www.iomega.com) requires no software installation and can hold 2GB of data. Each one comes with three brightly colored cases (gray, blue, and orange) and will plug into any USB port for instant access to files. You can even password-protect important data. The 64MB version sells for $39.95; the 512MB version sells for $129.95. At just 0.32 ounces and only 1.5 inches long, this USB 2.0 drive is so tiny you may forget you have it with you.

Although the Micro Mini is cute and little, the Crucial Gizmo! Hi-Speed USB Flash Drive (www.crucial.com) is like its cooler big sister. Sleek and silver, its 512MB version sells for $42.99 and measures 3.25 inches long. It isn't the smallest drive on the market, but it's thin enough that it won't block neighboring USB ports when in use. The drive is compatible with Windows Me/2000/XP, as well as with Mac OS 8.6 and above. Crucial's Secure-D software, which comes loaded on the drive, lets you password-protect most of your data, but buyer beware: If you forget your password, you'll lose all of your data, and you'll have to return the drive to the manufacturer to be reset.

If you want to feel like James Bond—and make your accessories multitask—the Meritline Rist Memory Watch is a watch with built-in flash memory. It comes in several colors, sizes, and styles ranging from a 64MB version ($37.99) to a 1GB version ($139.99). The telltale sign that your watch is a Rist Memory Watch is the mini-USB port covered by a little piece of plastic on the left side. The futuristic watch is even powered by the movement of your body, so you'll never have to wind it or replace the battery. When connected to your PC, the ManagerX software lets you password-protect the data on the watch, but if you forget your password, you'll have to reformat and will lose all of the data. The watch also comes with a retractable 2.5-foot USB cord and a disc loaded with the driver software.

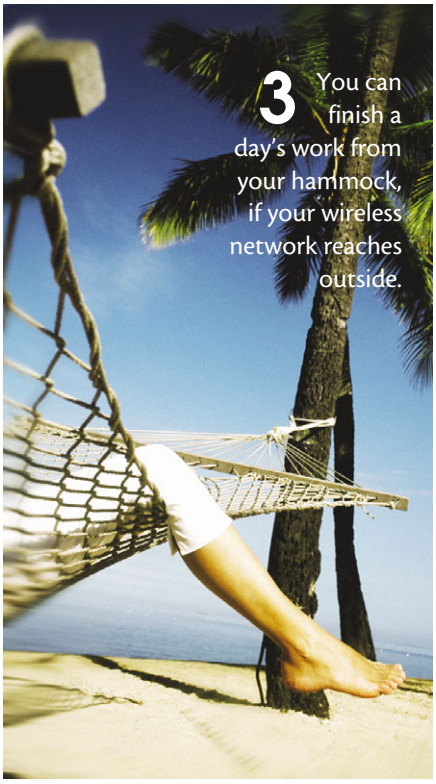
Editor's Top 10

Reasons I Love These Devices

CE Lifestyles editor Katie Sommer plugs in to one of the coolest CE accessories of the year to reveal why she thinks laptops are a must-have for today's woman.

1 Totes are in. Laptop totes are even more in. (I just bought a cute, black patent leather one and got lots of compliments on it during a recent visit to New York City.)

2 Many hotels have some sort of free Internet access, so emailing Grandma a few pictures from your family's seaside vacation is easier than ever.



5 Laptops are lighter than ever, making it easy and comfortable to carry one along with your purse, diaper bag, and that novel you are currently reading.

6 You don't need cords to type and surf comfortably: Pick up a cordless keyboard and mouse (look for one in a bright red or sky blue) for ultimate computing ease.

7 You can follow online cooking demonstrations while in the kitchen getting ready for your annual dinner party.

8 If you have the right optical drive, you can turn your laptop into a portable DVD player for the kids to use on a road trip.

9 Laptops no longer play second fiddle to desktop systems, so if you live in a downtown loft or other small space, you won't have to sacrifice performance for size.

10 Many new laptop designs are so elegant and stylish that they look like your new Juicy Couture handbag.

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Tips: Keep Your Laptop Bag Light

Start Light

It is hard to keep your full laptop bag light if your bag is heavy when it is empty. Many synthetic materials provide durability and protection as well as leather does but without as much weight, so consider the material the laptop bag is made of before you buy it. Also, bags made of the same material may vary in weight and comfort based on size and features. Try on the empty bag in the store before you buy it to make sure it is comfortable to carry and is relatively lightweight. Look for a shoulder strap with padding and an ergonomic design that will help distribute the bag's overall weight to increase comfort.

Carry A USB Drive

Small, lightweight, and portable, a USB drive can save your life—or at least your presentation. USB drives offer a significant amount of data storage (from 128MB to several gigabytes) for a reasonable price (usually from $25 to $100, depending on storage capacity). They are about the size of a key chain and weigh only about one to two ounces. By taking a USB drive with your laptop, you can have a backup of your crucial documents without adding much weight to your bag in case your laptop crashes or is stolen.

Pack A Protector

We protect our laptop and electronics at home and at the office; however, not as many of us keep a surge protector in our laptop bag for computer protection on the go. Though many surge protectors are large, bulky power strips that are hard to travel with, you can get a lightweight and compact portable surge protector for $10 to $25. For convenience, look for a surge protector with a retractable cord to reduce awkward bulk in your bag.

Plan & Prepare Paperwork

While printer manufacturers have made improvements on portable units, avoid the extra weight and leave the printer at home. If you need less than 50 pages, carrying those pages with you will be lighter than a three- or four-pound printer, especially because even if you decide to bring your printer, you still have to haul the blank pages. Instead, print the documents you need prior to your departure. Or, if you need to print while traveling, use the remote office's network printer, take advantage of the airport or hotel's business center, or use your USB drive to print from someone else's machine. Just remember there can be technical difficulties wherever you print, especially when interfacing with equipment other than your usual system, so consider if you want to risk printing problems while traveling.

Remain Comfortable

Many laptops come with full-sized keyboards, but you are forced to use the sometimes annoying touchpad, trackball, or eraser-nub mouse unless you bring a separate optical mouse with you. If you are most comfortable using an optical mouse and need one on your trip, try a wireless mouse (about $20 to $100, depending on features). It won't take up much space in your bag and will keep you from hauling around extra cords while still giving you the ease of use you have at home.

BY DACIA L. ROLANDO

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BY BRIAN HODGE

Digital Camera Accessories

Must-Haves For Back-To-School

Autumn means a return to institutions of learning. And digital cameras—whether needed for assignments or to simply chronicle the experience—are more plentiful, compact, and powerful than ever. They're cheaper, too. Your savings on the price tag may mean some of your budget is left over for a few accessories.

Lexar USB 2.0 Multi-Card Reader

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www.lexarmedia.com

We all enjoy swapping photo files with friends, some of whom inevitably have cameras that use different memory card formats. You can always email one or two files, but 50? Lexar's Multi-Card Reader provides high-speed data transfers and handles CF (CompactFlash), SmartMedia, Memory Stick, MMC (MultiMediaCard), SD (Secure Digital), MicroDrives, and more, including a few formats we'd never even heard of.

SanDisk 1GB Memory Card

Price varies by format
www.sandisk.com

Even at a relaxed pace we can procrastinate when it comes to offloading images from our memory cards . . . and school is often anything but relaxed. Fortunately, a high-capacity card will take awhile to fill up. SanDisk is one of the pioneering developers of media card technology and it has capacious cards in whatever format your camera demands, including CompactFlash ($99.99), Secure Digital ($99.99), and Memory Stick PRO ($129.99).

Kinetronics CC-020 Digital Camera Cleaning Kit

$10.95
www.kinetronics.com

You say your pictures would look great if it weren't for the random blurs and speckles? Treat your camera lens, viewfinder, and display to a crash course in good hygiene. This kit includes a microfiber cloth and an antistatic brush and is available in your choice of a plastic case or vinyl pouch.

LeSportsac Cargo Camera Bag

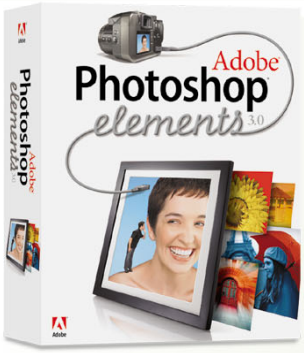
$63
www.lesportsac.com

For more than 30 years, LeSportsac has been making casual bags for active lifestyles. Its new camera bag, available in late summer, has multiple pockets for accessories and comes in your choice of black, taupe, or a variety of seasonal patterns so vivid you'll need to wear shades. If the Cargo model is a little too deluxe, LeSportsac also offers a Basic Camera Bag ($45).

Manfrotto 709 Digi Table Top Tripod

$39
www.bogenimaging.us

When shooting in such low-light settings as candlelit dorm rooms and dimmed theaters, you will likely get a blurry photo if you don't stabilize the camera during the long exposure. This ultra-portable tripod has a ball-head mount to ensure smooth panning and tilt, comes in black or silver, and measures just under eight inches when folded together.



Adobe Photoshop Elements 3.0

$99.99 Windows, $89.99 Mac
www.adobe.com

Photoshop is the world's foremost photo-editing software, letting users accomplish everything from simple cropping to creating elaborate collages. Elements, Photoshop's slimmed down sibling, provides about 80% of the functionality for around 16% of the cost. You don't need to be a math major to know that's great value.

Canon Selphy CP400 Compact Photo Printer

$149
www.canonusa.com

Do pictures truly exist if you can't shuffle them in your hands? Measuring just 6.73 inches wide, the CP400 is a self-contained desktop photo lab, using dye-sublimation thermal transfer to create store-quality prints up to 4 x 8 inches.

Know How

One Problem, Three Solutions

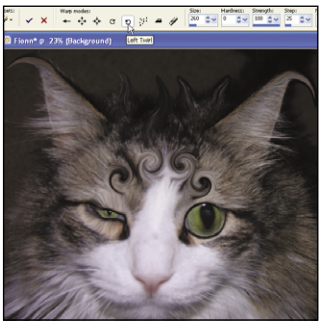
BY BRIAN HODGE

As summer's end draws near, odds are that you are heading toward Labor Day with a bunch more pictures of family and friends than you had on Memorial Day. With all the fun-filled activities summer had to offer, you are bound to have some photos that will be fun to play with. Who's to say that you can't take a few of those photos and inject them with some mad-scientist DNA?

Each of our featured photo editors has tools for creatively warping imagery, whether you need to make subtle adjustments that will still look natural or have an urge to twist an image beyond all recognition. For most of our illustrations, we'll forego human experimentation and work on a furrier subject who looks rather ambivalent about being photographed in the first place.

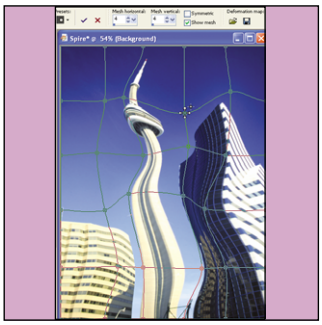
Jasc Paint Shop Pro 9

Paint Shop Pro provides two methods for warping images. The simplest is the Mesh Warp, located in the second tool group on the left toolbar.



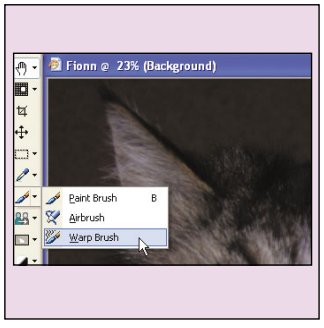
Fine-tune the brush's Size and other attributes in the Tool Options Palette. Here you'll also choose from several Warp Modes. Push drags pixels in the direction of the brush stroke. Expand enlarges an area, while Contract shrinks it. Right Twirl and Left Twirl rotate pixels when you click and hold.

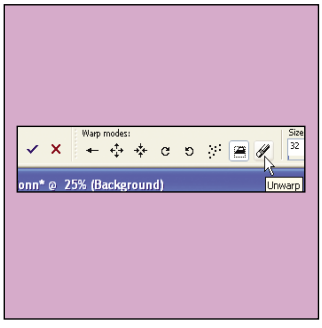
Mesh Warp overlays your photo with a grid; you can reset the number of lines in the Horizontal and Vertical value boxes above the picture. To warp the image, click and drag the grid's intersection points. This works great on imagery with lots of straight lines, such as architecture.



Noise Mode is unique to Paint Shop Pro. It causes pixels to jitter randomly as long as you hold down the left mouse button. Here a large Brush Size (356) and high Noise Level (84) bend our cat's nose out of shape.

The other warping method is the Warp Brush, located in the toolbar's brush group.

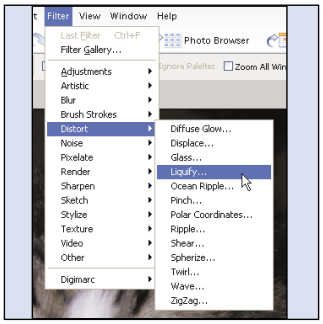




To undo or gradually reverse an action, choose the Iron Out or Unwarp modes. To freeze a warp so it can't be undone, click the Apply check mark in the Tool Options Palette.

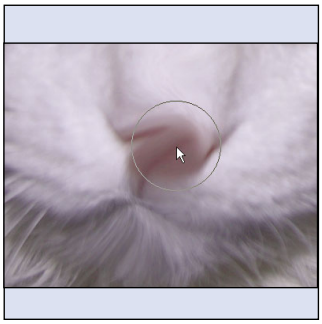
Adobe Photoshop Elements 3.0

With your photo in the workspace—either Quick Fix or Standard Edit view is fine—open the Filter menu and choose Distort and then Liquify.



Pucker constricts the region inward toward a central point, and Bloat swells it outward.

This opens a new window in which your photo's pixels become a kind of digital putty. Along the left side are eight tools that let you manipulate the pixels. On the right you can change the Brush Size and Brush Pressure. (The higher the pressure, the more pronounced an effect it has.)



Shift Pixels shoves pixels perpendicular to the brush stroke. Dragging up moves pixels to the left, and down moves them to the right. Dragging left to right moves pixels up, and right to left moves them down. To reverse the pixels' direction, hold down the ALT key (on Macs, the Option key).

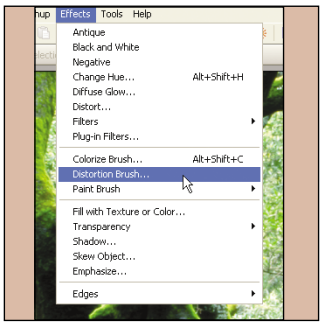
The best way to get acquainted with these tools is to simply start having fun, but to get you going: The Warp tool lets you pull pixels in any direction by clicking and dragging.

That's one surly-looking cat! If you need to start over, click the Revert button. To undo a portion of the change, select the Reconstruct Tool and then click and hold the circle over the modified area.

The Twirl Clockwise and Counter Clockwise options rotate pixels when you click and hold on an area. Think of a fork in spaghetti.

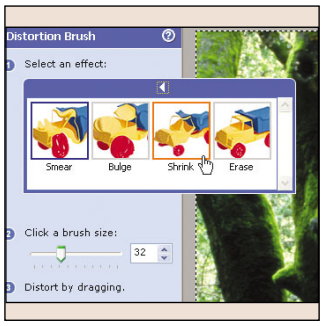
Microsoft Digital Image Pro 10

Open the Effects menu and choose the Distortion Brush.



Smear drags pixels in the direction of the brush stroke. Bulge enlarges the area covered by the brush, and Shrink contracts it each time you click or click and drag the brush. Erase, of course, lets you reverse or undo distortions.

Compared to Photoshop Elements and Paint Shop Pro, Digital Image Pro's tools are much simpler and more limited, with just four modes and a single slider to set Brush Size. Still, these cover the most common warping functions.



Rather than repeat ourselves, we decided to give our poor kitty a break and demonstrate another application for these tools. Using only the three distortion modes that DIP gives us, we've turned the landscape from the previous step into something that looks more like a swirling abstract painting.

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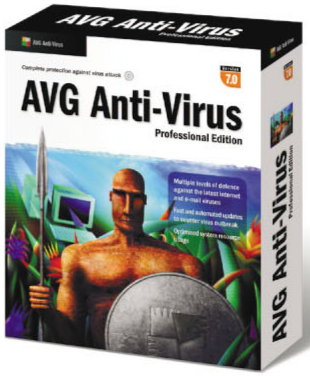

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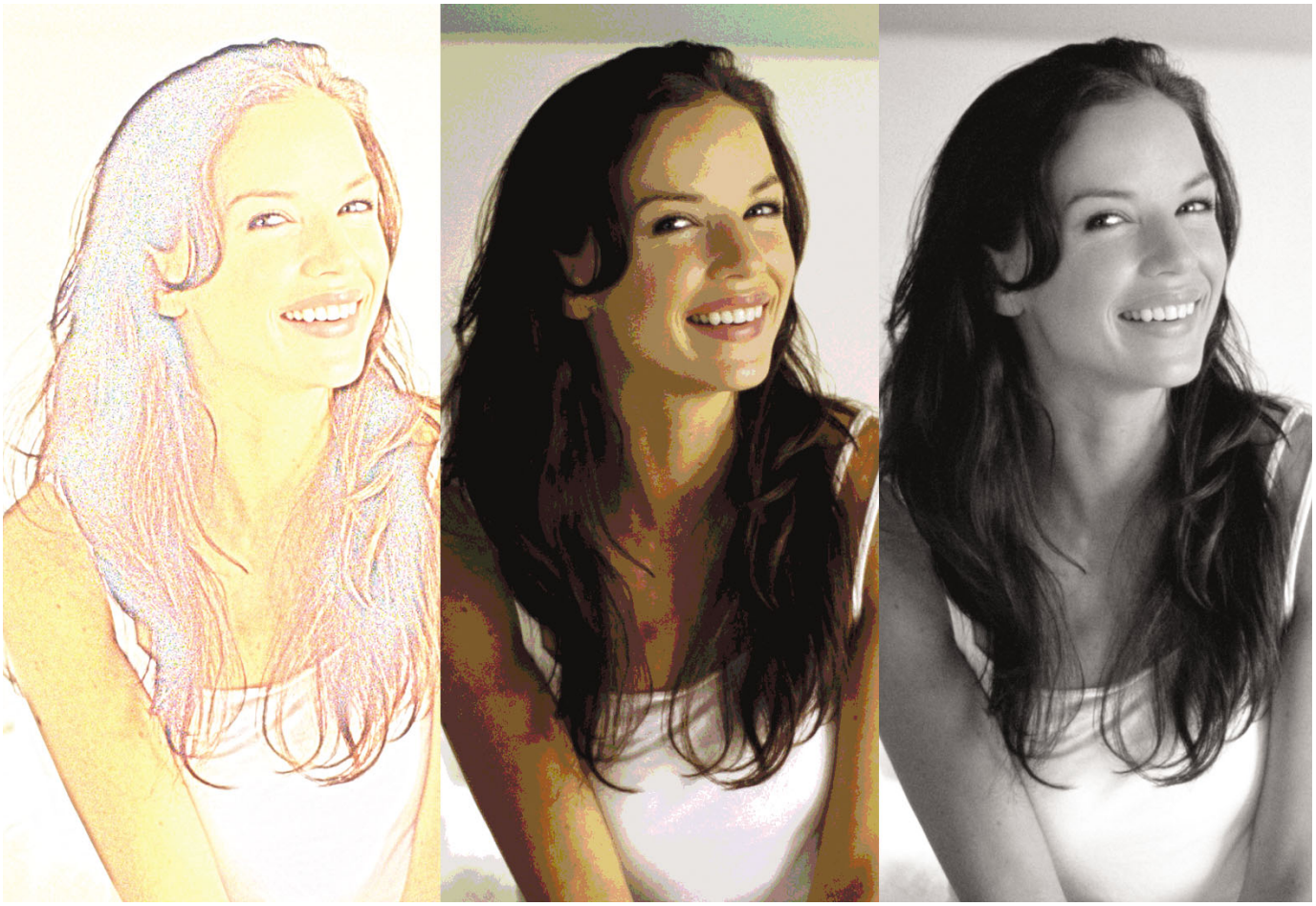


Artsy Photo Effects

From Monotonous To Monet

That snapshot of your niece blowing out the candles on her birthday cake is cute, but it's not art. Not yet, anyway. The image is a little blurry and underexposed, and because your white balance setting was incorrect, the color is a little strange. But because you have the power of PC-based digital imaging tools, you can take a basic, flawed snapshot and turn it into an unforgettable work of art.

So, after you get comfortable with your image-editing program's basic tools, it's time to get more creative by using your editor's funky filters and other advanced features. With a bit of practice, you'll be able to create eye-catching masterpieces from even the most ordinary photos.

We'll show you how to use popular special effects features commonly included in a range of photo-editing programs. Then, we'll provide steps for honing the effects of specific tools in individual applications such as Digital Image Pro and Paint Shop Pro.

Before you dive into our imaging experiments, take some precautions to preserve your original photos. Create an Edited Images folder on your computer's hard drive and copy (don't cut and paste) the images you want to edit into this folder. By editing only photos located in this

folder, you'll avoid the pain and frustration that occurs when you accidentally and permanently overwrite an image with an edited version.

If you do make a mistake and save an image after you've made editing changes, you might not be out of luck, so long as you haven't already closed the photo you were editing. That's because all photo editors have an Undo or Step Back command that lets you undo previous commands—so even if you've saved the image, you can step back through your changes until you get to the original version. Then you can save the image again to retain its pre-edited form.

Black & White

From baby portraits to wedding pictures, black-and-white photography is in right now. Most image-editing programs will let you convert a color image into a black-and-white photo. This technique adds a completely different mood to photos originally shot in color, so be sure to try it when you're playing around with manipulation possibilities.

Many programs include a one-click option to make this process as easy as possible. Sometimes, the effect is simply called Black And White, and it's found under a menu called Filters or Special Effects. Other times, you'll find the monochrome option called Remove Color or Desaturate. When you select these kinds of tools, which typically complete the black-and-white creation process automatically, you won't have many options for tweaking the effect.

Don't stop with the automatic monochrome command. Black-and-white photos look very different depending on the intensity of the grays and whites you see, so open your editor's Levels tool and experiment the color level sliders here. You'll likely find that you

Create A Black & White Sketch

You'll only need a few minutes to create a black-and-white sketch using Photoshop. This effect is particularly striking when you use it for portraits.

- Open your image and from the Windows menu, click Layers. This opens a Layer window so you can see the changes you're making.
- Press CTRL-J twice. This creates two new layers (or copies of the image), which basically give you free rein to make many changes to your photo without having to backtrack through edits you made to only a single copy.
- In the Layers window, select the Layer 1 copy. From the Image menu, point to Adjustments and then click Desaturate.
- In the Layers window, click the background layer and then press CTRL-DELETE to fill this layer with the background color on your toolbar. You want the background layer to be white.
- In the Layers window, select the Layer 1 Copy and then press CTRL-I to invert the tone of the image.
- Press ALT-SHIFT-D to perform Color Dodge command.
- From the Filters menu, point to Blur and then click Gaussian Blur. Move the slider at the bottom of the Gaussian Blur box to find the most pleasing effect.
- When you're ready to save the image, you have to "flatten" the layers in order to save your masterpiece as a typical JPEG (Joint Photographic Experts Group) file. From the Layer menu, click Flatten Image. Then, you can save and use the image any way you please.

can create a more stunning image by altering these settings manually.

Go With Glow

The Diffuse Glow filter helps you add softness to a portrait or lend a mystical aura to a scenic landscape. You will usually find this tool in the Effects, Filters, or Distort menus of various photo-editing programs.

Most incarnations of the Diffuse Glow filter require you to define a few settings that drastically change the results you see. Those settings are usually called Transparency, Graininess, Intensity, and Definition, or something similar. Some programs have more options than others.

The Transparency setting refers to the opacity of the glow effect. A higher setting reduces the glow and gives your original composition priority over the filter's power. Lower the transparency number, though, and the glow will become stronger and stronger, until it softens or completely masks certain details in your photos.

A moderate amount of grain will completely change the mood of your photo by interrupting certain details in your image.

For example, if you increase this setting while you're editing a friend's portrait, a high transparency setting would make it seem as if your subject were glowing softly. A lower transparency number would create a more ghostly effect. If the person in this image has a few skin imperfections, this command creates a washed out effect that masks minor flaws for a more flattering photo.

You can use the Graininess setting to add varying amounts of noisy grain to your image. If you're looking for an ultra-sharp and slick-looking image, you might want to pass on this option. On the other hand, if you want to give your photo a grungier feel (or you want to mask the fact that the image originally had too much digital noise), this is a good option.

Load your friend's portrait again and you'll see the power of the Graininess feature. A moderate amount of grain will completely change the mood of your photo by interrupting certain details in your image, and as with the Transparency setting, grain may help you hide image flaws. Whatever you do, don't forget to add a lot of grain to a few black-and-white images, as this technique adds an intangible sense of mystery to monochrome.

The Intensity setting lets you increase or decrease the glow. By using this option, you'll see that the Diffuse Glow primarily appears in the lighter areas of your images, a characteristic that you can control with the Definition setting. Increasing the Definition restricts the glow to only small areas with very bright highlights, while decreasing this setting lets the glow spread to other areas, softening the effect.

Digital Image Pro Distortion

Microsoft's Digital Image Pro 10 includes a Distortion Brush tool that makes it easy to warp your images in countless ways. You can use a little distortion to correct minor image errors or use a lot of distortion to create an otherworldly effect.

Load a photo into Digital Image Pro and perform necessary changes, such as cropping or color adjustments. Then, from the Effects menu, click Distortion Brush. You'll see four effects (Smear, Bulge, Shrink, and Erase) on the left side of your screen. Click an effect, select a brush size, and click a spot on your image a few times.

The Frame Game

Finding just the right frame for your digital art might be the hardest part of the entire creative process. Following a few basic decorating rules will help you avoid frame faux pas.

Consider your image and the mood it evokes and then select a frame that accentuates that mood. In other words, the frame should complement your picture, so don't select a huge, ornamental frame for a delicate flower image. Fancy frames in general often distract from the picture, so going with a plainer frame is the safest bet.

Avoid using a frame with a color that matches the hues in your picture. Instead, select a color that creates more contrast. Stay away from garish mat colors, which are distracting and usually diminish the visual impact of your picture.

Not only should you match the frame to the picture, but you should also select a frame that goes well with your home's décor. Contemporary frames that smack of minimalism clash with rooms that have a lot of rich wooden surfaces. Dark wood frames don't go well with airy interiors, but they're great for more subdued environments. ●

Click and drag to see the Smear effect, which will basically wipe the colors and lines of your image in the direction you drag. The Bulge and Shrink effects will enlarge or shrivel areas of your image without destroying too many details, letting you, for instance, give bulging eyes to your Bassett hound or put bigger biceps on your boyfriend without warping other areas of the image. Use the Erase option to adjust or remove distortion effects or use the Reset button on the bottom of the dialog box to start over. For more detailed information on some of these features, see "Know How" on page 66 in this issue.

Paint Shop Pro 9

The adjustable Soft Focus feature included in Jasc's Paint Shop Pro 9 helps you soften an image without losing a lot of detail. This kind of effect is ideal for subjects that deserve a gentle touch, such as a bridal portrait or a baby's baptism picture. The overall effect will vary depending on how you adjust the options in this tool.

Load a photo in Paint Shop Pro and perform any basic color correction or cropping tasks you find necessary. From the Adjust menu, point to Softness and then click Soft Focus. You'll see two windows, one with the original image, and one with the soft-focus effect applied.

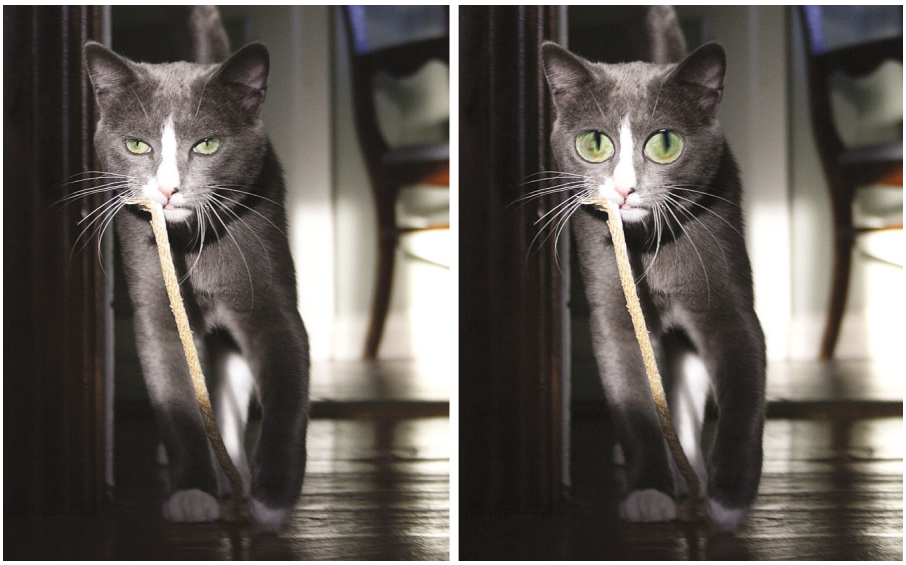
At the top of the Soft Focus dialog box, you'll see a Presets drop-down menu that lets you select from numerous variations of the Soft Focus effect. If you don't like the preset rules, you can manually adjust the Focus and Halo characteristics below the preview images.

Use the Softness and Edge Importance sliders to control the softness effect. Use the Halo sliders to control the way light in your image responds to the Soft Focus filter. And if you don't like any of your changes, just click the dice button below the preview image—this button randomizes the filter's parameters until you stumble upon a combination you like.

Amuse Your Muse

One of the best parts of digital photo editing is that you can experiment for hours until you find just the look you want, and if you run into problems, you can always start over again. So take your time, have fun with the dozens of high-tech tools at your disposal, and create on-screen art as bizarre or beautiful as your imagination demands. ce

BY NATHAN CHANDLER



We tweaked this photo using the Distortion tool in Digital Image Pro 10. To get this effect we simply selected a large brush size and clicked the eyes until they were properly warped.

Decorating Tips

Now that you've printed and framed your photos, all that's left to do is display them in your home. Here are a few ideas for hanging your photos for maximum artistic impact.

- Capture a landscape in three photos, frame each print separately, and then hang them side-by-side on your wall to create a dramatic segmented effect.
- Take a single photo, edit it to look wildly different, frame each print, and then hang them in a square on your wall.
- Buy large wooden frames, remove the backing and glass, and hang smaller frame photos inside. In effect this lets you use the color of the wall as part of the display, and helps you smoothly integrate the photo into your décor.
- Buy some wallpaper that coordinates with your wall's color, cut the paper into large squares or rectangles, and hang your photos in the paper for an edgy visual effect.
- Trim your photos to fit a large piece of foam core, and then hang the foam core directly on your wall. This frameless display lends a 3D look to your photos that will grab your visitors' eyes.

tips Buy The Right Digital Camcorder

1 Weight A Minute

Before you search for the perfect digital camcorder, take some time to assess your needs. Make a list of places you'd like to take your camcorder (such as to the soccer field or on a road trip) and events you'd like to record (such as your daughter's T-ball game or Bastille Day in Paris). Consider a camcorder that will not only give you the quality features you need but will also be convenient to tote around easily in your purse or a diaper bag. Most digital camcorders weigh between one and four pounds. Though that might not seem like much of a difference, the extra couple of pounds can put undue strain on your shoulder if you have to carry the device often or for a long period of time.

2 Find A Format

Camcorders are available in several recording formats, so make sure you know which format will work best for you. MiniDVD format lets you record directly to a small DVD instead of a tape, producing high-quality video and audio. MiniDV format uses a small cassette (about 2 x 2.75 inches), which keeps the camcorders small and light. Another format is Digital8, which lets you record digital video as well as play back older analog tapes. This format lets your camcorder work with your other analog devices, but you will sacrifice video quality.

3 Use Optical Zoom

Digital camcorders all come with zoom capabilities: optical zoom and digital zoom. Digital zoom lenses magnify the pixels of images within the camcorder, so while the pixels get bigger, they don't increase in number to make an image clearer. Optical zoom lenses physically zoom in to get closer to the object and, therefore, use more pixels on the image, magnifying and clarifying it more than digital zoom can. You will find that most digital camcorders have 10X to 20X optical zoom capabilities; shop for a camcorder with this feature to get a clearer picture of zoomed shots while filming.

4 High Definition A Definite Possibility

There is no doubt that high-definition technology is growing in popularity. If you have already invested in an HDTV, you may want to buy an HD digital camcorder, as well. You can hook the HD camcorder directly to your HDTV and view your movies in high definition. Before you buy an HD camcorder, check your computer's storage requirements and your editing program's capabilities. Most editing software isn't yet suited to handle HD video footage, but if you find software that works with HD video, make sure your computer has enough hard drive space to store it. HD footage has about twice the resolution of digital video content and takes up more space on your hard drive.

5 Try It Out

After you research features of digital camcorders and know which ones are most important to you, it's time to shop. Because digital camcorders can be an expensive purchase, be picky so you can find one that fits your needs well. Don't be afraid to ask a salesperson if you can test the camcorder in the store. Many stores let you pick up and examine various models, and some stores will hook up a camcorder to an in-store television so you can accurately see what the camcorder's picture would look like before you buy.

BY SAM EVANS

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Invasion Of The Pod People

The Hardest Part Of Accessorizing Your iPod Is Deciding Where To Begin

When it comes to digital music players, there's the iPod, and there's everything else. It isn't just the iPod's 500-pound-gorilla market share. It's also the hundreds of accessories out there, a phenomenon you don't see proliferating around the competition.

We have rounded up 13 accessories and played with all of them. Some are high-profile items, others are well-kept secrets, and they are all worth considering, although the appeal of some of them will ultimately depend on your listening habits.

Below, we list the compatibility for each accessory. "All iPods" means all four generations of full-sized players, both iPod minis, and the iPod shuffle. "G" denotes generation, currently up to number 4 (also known as the Click-Wheel iPod), which includes the iPod photo. Items that have compatibility of "3G/4G + Mini" usually use the dock connector, a feature not found on earlier models.

BY BRIAN HODGE

$149 www.etymotic.com (All iPods)

Etymotic 6i Isolator Earphones

Apple's standard earbuds sound good, but if you've ever wished they sounded even better, give these high-tech phones serious consideration. They fit deeper into the ear canal and, using your choice of interchangeable foam or rubber-like tips, seal off the outer world so it's just you and the music. A good fit is crucial (smaller and larger tips are free upon request), and when you achieve it, the sound quality is amazing, with a noticeably deeper bass response and a pleasantly crisp high end. We could stand over a noisy vacuum cleaner while listening to quiet music and barely hear the vacuum while picking up new detail in the song.

Macally Podwave Portable Stereo Speakers

About the size of a roll of quarters, this attachment plugs into your iPod's earbud jack. To avoid draining your player's power, it runs off one AA battery. Deep bass notes pretty much get lost, and overall it sounds like a good transistor radio. But if you don't like being tethered to earbuds yet still want to keep your music pocket-portable, this could be your alternative.

$39 www.macally.com (All iPods)

DLO iBoom

This is a compact but kickin' boombox, powered by your choice of six D batteries or the attached power cord. At 20W per channel, it may not deafen you, but it will easily fill a room with quality sound. Just fit your iPod into the docking slot and choose between it and the built-in FM radio. If you plan to tote the iBoom around, check out the BoomBag ($44.99), a tough, padded neoprene shell (with pockets and a detachable shoulder strap) that zips snugly around the iBoom and makes safe transportation a cinch.

$129.99 www.dlodirect.com (3G/4G + mini)

JBL On Stage

This tabletop system combines a dock and four speakers into a unit that looks a little like a flying saucer. 3G and 4G iPods and the mini will recharge while attached, and the audio is routed through the dock connector (the same applies to the iBoom and iFi below). Older iPods must connect to the base via an audio cable. The one-inch speakers won't rattle your floorboards, but the audio quality is surprisingly good, with acoustic music sounding especially crisp and clear.

$159.95 www.jbl.com (All full-sized iPods + mini)

Keep It Clean

With their glossy surfaces, it doesn't take long for iPods to acquire a lived-in look, especially if they've been rattling around naked instead of in a protective sleeve. But you can rejuvenate yours with iCleaner Cleaning Solutions (www.ipodcleaner.com).

Individual bottles start at $14.95, but the Ultra Pro Kit ($35) contains the works: Scratch Remover, Maintenance Polish, and Back & Deep Scratch Polish, plus a couple of microfiber cloths and a latex glove. Elbow grease is definitely required, but these really can restore an iPod's luster as long as it hasn't been brutally abused.

Timbuk2 Carrying Case

There seem to be a jillion sleeves and cases for the iPod, but Timbuk2's are among the very best, made of the same padded ballistic nylon that goes into its renowned bicycle messenger bags. The iPod case will fit onto your belt or around the shoulder strap of a camera bag, backpack, etc. A Velcro strap secures the player while leaving the earbud jack and hold switch accessible. It covers the iPod's front-panel controls, but we prefer the added protection.

$20 www.timbuk2.com (All full-sized iPods + mini)

Griffin AirClick

Griffin's AirClick consists of a receiver that plugs into the top of your iPod (and has its own earbud jack) and an RF (radio frequency) remote control unit. You can start, stop, and skip tracks; fast-forward or reverse; and control the volume, unless your iPod is plugged into a system like the On Stage or iBoom, with its own volume control. The AirClick does share one limitation with the iFi remote: You can't navigate iPod menus horizontally, only vertically, within a playlist, album, etc. Still, it keeps your iPod at your fingertips, whether it's zipped into your jacket pocket or across the house.

$39.99 www.griffintechnology.com (3G/4G + mini)

Griffin TuneJuice

Part of the iPod's convenience is its rechargeable battery. But the charge inevitably runs dry, which can unfortunately leave you tuneless during a long plane ride, a weekend hike, or other marathon excursions. All is not lost, however; just break out the auxiliary power supply. Griffin's TuneJuice lets you plug a 9-volt battery into the dock connector for up to eight additional hours of power.

$19.99 www.griffintechnology.com (3G/4G + mini)

Tunes On Wheels

iPods aren't just for your pocket, belt, or tabletop. They can also hit the road as a component of your automotive sound system.

$24.99 www.belkin.com (All iPods)

Belkin Mobile Cassette Adapter

Patching your iPod into your car's audio system doesn't get any simpler than this: a cassette shell that slides into side- or front-loading tape players. A four-foot stereo cord trails out of the slot, terminating in a plug that connects to your iPod's earbud jack.

DLO TransPod

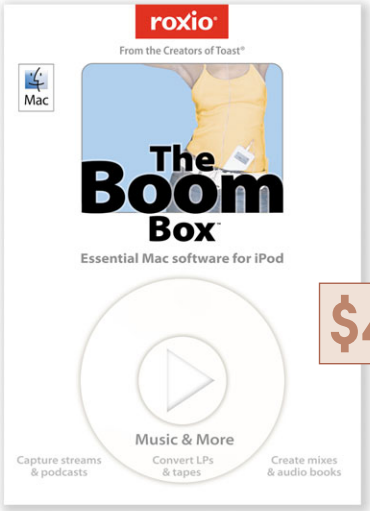
This is a slick, all-in-one product based around a docking station that not only holds the iPod securely, but powers it from your car's in-dash cigarette lighter and transmits the player's audio to an unused FM radio band. The TransPod comes with hardware for multiple mounting options, and both the dock and your iPod are easily removable so you never need to leave them visible as a temptation for thieves.

$99.99 www.dlodirect.com (3G/4G + mini)

Newer Technology NuPower Replacement Batteries

It's a sad fact of technological life that rechargeable batteries have a limited number of charge cycles. It may not happen for years, but your iPod's battery will eventually give out. Fortunately, it's replaceable—user-replaceable, if you're careful. The NuPower batteries come with non-scratch tools so you can open your iPod and change the batteries yourself. If you need some guidance, you can download a heavily illustrated manual, as well as QuickTime movies, from Newer Technology's Web site to walk you through the procedure.

$25.99 to $39.95 www.newertech.com (1G/2G/3G/4G)



Roxio The Boom Box

Billed as the iPod's first software accessory (Mac only, although a Windows equivalent is likely forthcoming), this suite bundles five programs to widen the selection of what you feed your iPod. Among the quintet, almost nothing is out of reach: digitizing tapes and vinyl LPs, recording Webcasts, locating and downloading entries from the exploding podcast culture, creating playlists based on soundwave analysis and other criteria, and even generating spoken-word audio files from text.

$49.99 www.roxio.com (All iPods)

IS THIS FOR REAL?

Chewbacca Puff

So maybe Chewbacca is the coolest "Star Wars" character, but that doesn't mean we should wear him. Sure, this misguided iPod sleeve ($29.95; www.paagpak.com) will keep your iPod warm, but it's big and bulky, and it doesn't even have an earbud holder. But we forgive the Paag Pak folks because, after all, Chewie is the tech-savviest beast around.

Klipsch iFi

If nothing less than heavyweight sound will satisfy, here's your answer, delivered by over 40 pounds of speakers. The iFi is a 200-watt, 2.1 system featuring a pair of satellite speakers and a subwoofer that plunges deep down in the impact zone to 27Hz (Hertz). Klipsch is famous for gorgeous, high-performance audio components, and it shows here, with a rich, expansive sound that rivals full-sized systems. The iPod fits into an egg-shaped dock and is controllable by an RF remote that's effective even through walls and floors. If you've converted your entire music collection to digital files, this may be all the home speaker system you need.

$399.99 www.klipsch.com (3G/4G + mini)

Get Ready For Baby!

Use CE To Keep You & Your Baby Happy & Safe

You've stocked the nursery with diapers, wipes, powder, Onesies, blankets, and more. All those things, plus your tender, loving care, will help your baby grow healthy and happy, yet you may not have all you need.

Have you also considered the CE devices that can benefit your baby and you? Read on to learn more about technology, from a cell phone to a video baby monitor, that can help keep you and your baby happy, healthy, and safe.

The Standard Stuff

Capturing the milestones in your child's life is one of the many jobs new parents have, but to do that sufficiently, it's helpful to have staple CE items, such as a digital camera or camcorder, nearby at all times. In addition to features and price, consider size and weight when shopping for electronics, including the most standard of all CE products, a cell phone. You're bound to take at least one device with you all the time, but you don't want it weighing down your purse, diaper bag, or bandolier (see the "Just For Dads" sidebar for more information).

Check out the following space-saving CE when shopping for these standard items.

Digital cameras. You may not take many pictures now, but just wait until the baby arrives. You'll want to capture all those memorable firsts, plus the precious moments in between. A digital camera, and all the gear that goes with it, not only gives you the benefit of saving the good shots, but also printing them at home or sharing them with friends and family through a Web site or email.

The 5.2MP (megapixel) HP Photosmart M417 ($199.99; www.hp.com) renders 4- x 6-inch prints and enlargements up to 16 x 20 inches. It features a 3X optical and 7X digital zoom, a 1.8-inch display, and red-eye correction. With its 16MB of storage, you can save dozens of pictures or you can greatly expand that capacity with an SD (Secure Digital) card or MMC (MultiMediaCard), sold separately. These cards are less than an inch tall and can hold several gigabytes of memory.

You can find slimmer models on the market, but the Photosmart M417 (2.09 x 4.3 x 1.46 inches [HxWxD]) can still easily fit into your purse or diaper bag and offers good features at a great price.

Camcorders. Pull out your camcorder for those moments, such as your baby's first steps or words, when a snapshot won't effectively capture the experience. The 3CCD PV-GS250 Ultra-Compact Digital Palmcorder MultiCam Camcorder from Panasonic ($999.95; www.panasonic.com) packs a lot of tools into a small space. Without switching recording modes, you can record video with 10X optical zoom or 700X digital zoom and take still photos with up to a 3.1MP resolution at the same time. You can then print the images, which are stored on an SD memory card, on a PictBridge-compatible printer. The camcorder also comes with MotionDV STUDIO 5.3E software for editing and adding soundtracks to your videos.

For those times when you want to show far-away Grandma that your little one can finally say, "Gamma," you can turn the camcorder into a Web cam by plugging it into your PC with the included USB (Universal Serial Bus) connector and using Windows Messenger.

The PV-GS250 weighs just 1.1 pounds and is 2.875 x 3.25 x 5.625 inches but features a generous 2.5-inch display, letting you see your baby's movements with a clear picture while you record.

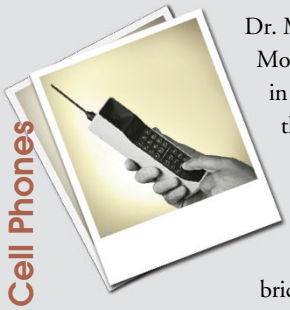
Cell phones. Even the best parents need a break every so often, and a cell phone can let you be much more at ease with an evening away from your baby. Cell phones offer an unbelievable range of features from which to choose—from basic voice and text tools to integrated digital cameras, video cameras, and Bluetooth technology, which lets you sync wirelessly with items such as a headset. However, pricing cell phones isn't an exact science

Once you get your baby to sleep, you want to make sure she stays safe throughout the night . . .

then & now

You've come a long way, baby monitors. A glance at history from just 20 to 30 years ago shows that many CE devices for babies and their parents were in their, um, infancy back then.

Cell Phones



Dr. Martin Cooper, who worked for Motorola, invented the first cell phone in 1973. That year, Motorola unveiled the design for its first cell phone, the DynaTAC, which became available to consumers in 1983. The first commercial DynaTAC phone weighed one pound, 12 ounces and looked like a brick with a lengthy antenna.

Motorola's ultra-slim, clamshell RAZR V3 ($199.99; www.motorola.com) weighs only 3.35 ounces, has an internal antenna and text and photo messaging, and can play video. You can store 1,000 entries in its phone book and use its calculator to figure out how much you're saving by using cloth diapers and its alarm clock to wake you up after those coveted catnaps.

Camcorders

Sony introduced its bulky Beta movie cameras (the SL-6300 and SL-7300) in 1975, but soon after, Sony started working on an 8mm video project, hoping it would become an industry standard. It did, and in 1985, Sony released the CCD-M8 Handycam 8mm camcorder. This record-only model, tipping the scale at 2.2 pounds, was remarkably lightweight compared to Beta camcorders.

Sony's new HDR-HC1 Handycam ($1,999.99; www.sonystyle.com) weighs in at just under 1.5 pounds, records high-definition digital video, and can take digital photos, as well, making it a must-have for new parents.

Baby Monitors

Early baby monitors, such as those from Safety 1st, a company founded in 1984, were essentially one-way walkie-talkies.

Some monitors offer audio and visual coverage. The BébéSounds 2.4GHz Portable Video & Sound Monitor ($199.99; www.bebesounds.com) shows your baby on a wireless receiver's color LCD. You can clip the receiver to a belt and move up to 450 feet away when it's running on batteries.

Safety Alarms

First Alert introduced residential smoke alarms way back in 1967, but the company didn't make carbon monoxide detectors for homes until 1993. The company unveiled its first combo detector in 1996.

Combination smoke and carbon monoxide detectors from First Alert can be networked wirelessly throughout your home.

until you determine which carrier and package you want to use.

You can shop for a cell phone in two ways: by model or service provider. Many folks don't want to pay a lot for a cell phone because phone service is an ongoing expense. One compact, affordable model is the Motorola V180 ($39.99; www.motorola.com), offered by Cingular. This flip phone can store up to 500 numbers and has an integrated speakerphone, text and photo messaging, call waiting, and automatic redial. You can download and install new ringtones, wallpaper, and screensavers. When unfolded, this 3.3-ounce phone measures 3.4 x 1.8 x 1 inches.

Regardless of which cell phone and plan you choose, make sure you write down the number for your baby-sitter (a dry-erase board is perfect for this) and you might consider giving it to your neighbors, too.

The Daily Grind

There's no end to the creative—and sometimes desperate—measures parents have gone to just to get their babies to sleep. Lucky moms and dads can count on their little ones drifting off to soothing music. And in the category of tunes for tots, Lovely Baby CDs from Lovely Baby Music (www.lovelybabycd.com) are among the most unique.

The company, founded just three years ago, markets the music of the classically trained Dutch composer Raimond Lap, himself a father. He writes mostly instrumental pieces for newborns and toddlers up to age 3. He has produced four "Lovely Baby" CDs, plus "Baby Classics," "Baby Christmas," "Lovely Baby & Daddy," and "Lovely Sleepy Baby." You can sample tracks for each CD at the Lovely Baby Music Web site or purchase the CDs for $17.95 each.

Of course, you'll need a device on which to play those CDs. You could buy a CD player designed with kid appeal, one that even fits with your nursery décor, but perhaps a better player for the long term is one that will grow with your child and appeal to you, too. The CFD-S350SILVER from Sony ($59.95; www.sonystyle.com) fits that bill. It's an AM/FM radio, cassette player and recorder, and CD player on which you can program the playback order of up to 20 tracks from a CD. It also comes with a remote control, has four-inch high speakers, and can run on six D batteries.

Once you get your baby to sleep, you want to make sure she stays safe throughout the night, and today's baby monitoring devices, light-years removed from their early predecessors, go beyond the typical speaker through which you hear your baby's cries. Some of today's monitors, such as the BébéSounds Angelcare Movement Sensor With Sound Monitor ($74.99; www.bebesounds.com), give you other signs that your baby is sleeping or resting safely in her crib—a wonderful tool, especially for parents of newborns.

For example, when using the Angelcare Movement Sensor, you place a sensor pad underneath your baby's mattress and on top of a hard service. If it doesn't detect any movement whatsoever for 20 seconds, the pad transmits a signal to the nursery unit, which in turn sounds a warning for you to check on your baby. If you aren't near the nursery, you can use the portable parents' unit, a monitor that detects the nursery unit's alarm up to 200 feet away.

Keeping the house quiet while baby sleeps—and perhaps while Mom catches up on her beauty rest—is essential for new parents, and the TV Listener, a cordless headset from Unisar ($59.99; www.unisar.com) can help you do just that. Dads in particular might enjoy the TV Listener, which is similar in function to a remote control. The TV Listener communicates with TVs, stereos, computers, and other CE devices via infrared signals. You can control the volume of what you're listening to or watching by adjusting the headphones, which pick up signals from up to 33 feet away without interference from other CE products, such as cell phones.

Another way for parents to help their baby sleep calmly and consistently is to establish a daily routine of sleeping, eating, bathing, etc., for the baby. This is far easier said than done in most cases, but following a schedule as much as possible benefits both parents and the baby.

Babble Soft has designed Baby Manager 1.0 (free downloadable trial version, $21.95 for registered version; www.babblesoft.com) to help you keep track of when your baby eats and is changed and how often Mom breastfeeds and/or pumps. Simply enter the data and you can compile reports beneficial not only

Just For Dads

You may never convince Dad to change a dirty diaper, but the least he can do is carry the diaper bag or, in this case, wear the Baby Bandolier, an adjustable organizer that holds essentials for both baby and parent.

The Baby Bandolier, from Duds4Dads (www.duds4dads.com), comes in two styles: the black Unisex model ($34.95) and the larger, black and gray Extreme Conditions model ($39.95), ideal for longer trips. Both feature a pocket for your cell phone; space for your keys and wallet; a detachable, insulated bag to hold bottles; a fold-out changing pad with space for wipes; and a zippered double pouch that could easily hold snacks, diapers, a small digital camera or camcorder, or your PDA. ●

for you, but also for day care providers, baby-sitters, and especially your pediatrician. If necessary, you can generate reports for multiple newborns and toddlers, as well.

Baby Manager runs on any PC with Windows 98 or later. If you have a PDA, you can install the program on both that and your PC—an especially helpful feature for working moms.

Safe & Secure

Of all the ways you can offer security to your baby, perhaps none is as important as home safety, especially when safety is needed from such life-threatening forms as fire and the silent killer, carbon monoxide. The First Alert ONELINK-Enabled Smoke Alarm And Carbon Monoxide Alarm (model SCO500CN; $84.95; www.firstalert.com) provides safety against these two deadly agents.

You can program this battery-operated voice alarm with one of 11 locations to help you instantly pinpoint the origin of the danger. For instance, if you place it in your bathroom and program accordingly, the alarm will sound and a voice will warn you, "Warning! Evacuate! Smoke in bathroom," should a fire break out.

This combo alarm works wirelessly with other ONELINK units to give you whole-house protection. If you are in another part of your house when a fire erupts or carbon monoxide levels get too high, all the other alarms in the house will voice the same message.

Happy Shopping

It's inevitable that your shopping excursions increase after a baby comes along. When possible, shop for consumer electronics that will make your lives more peaceful and keep your baby safe along the way. ce

BY RACHEL DEROWITSCH

Speakers should be heard, not seen.
That's why we put them in the screen.

Three speakers integrated into the frame, two surround sound speakers and a subwoofer complete the system.

Introducing the Da-Lite Acoustical Imager

Designed for your decor and engineered for your senses. This revolutionary home theater system combines the clarity of a fixed Da-Lite screen with the harmony of a JBL 5.1 audio surround sound system. The Da-Lite Acoustical Imager is simple to set up. The left, right and center speakers are integrated into the screen's frame. The compact surround sound speakers bring up the rear while the subwoofer delivers the bass for a truly remarkable home theater experience. Choose between a Video or an HDTV screen. Available in eight projection surfaces. Or have Da-Lite custom build a screen for your home theater.

DA-LITE®
HOME THEATER SCREENS

Just Watch Us!

For a free Home Theater Catalog and screen recommendations, call toll free or visit us online.

1-800-622-3737

www.da-lite.com • © 2005 DA-LITE SCREEN COMPANY, INC.

tips Pick The Perfect Playlist

1 Automate Organization

Most media players include tools to automate your playlists. Apple's iTunes (free; www.apple.com), for example, calls them smart playlists because they automatically compile a list of songs that match criteria you request. For example, you can create a smart playlist called "1980s Pop" by adding a rule for all songs in which pop is the genre and another rule in the same list for songs released between 1980 and 1989. This kind of categorization will help you quickly find songs from your wide-ranging preferences of music types.

2 Enter All The Data

Metadata for a music file is information, such as title, artist, album name, date of release, genre, and more, that describes the songs in your playlist. You use it to create smart playlists based on combinations of metadata values. A song that is missing certain metadata may not meet your smart playlist rules and, therefore, would be excluded from the list, even if it technically belongs. Fortunately, if your song is missing some metadata, your media player probably has a feature that can look up the information in an online database and a feature that lets you enter the metadata yourself. Double-check your songs' information after you import them to the player and add missing information so your smart playlist can find all the songs that fit your criteria when it searches.

3 Separate Source Types

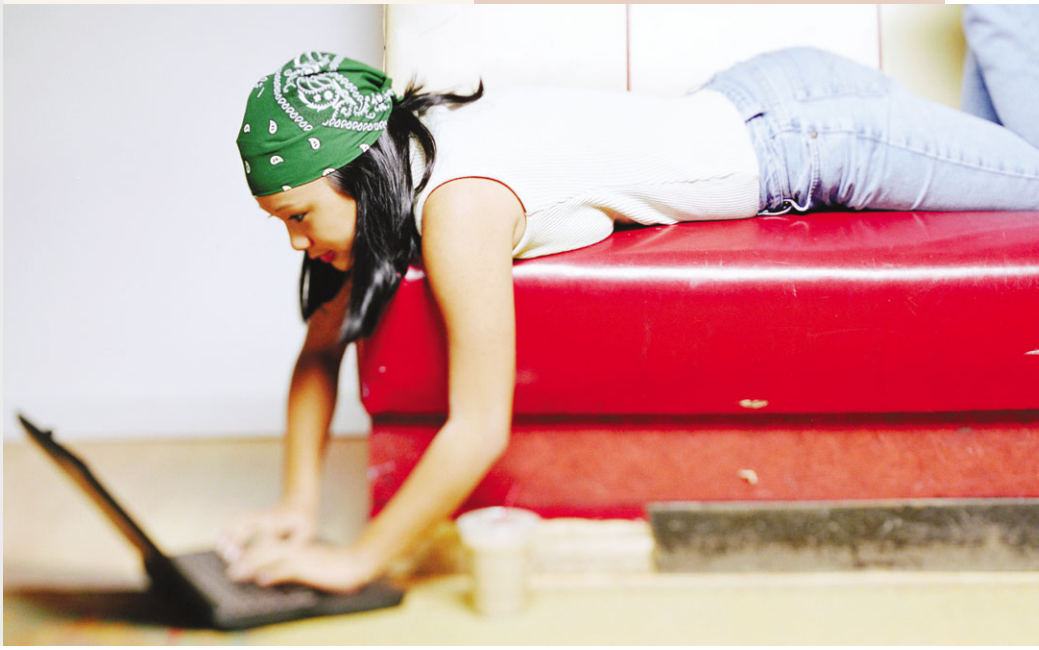
Remember the song that never ends that you learned at summer camp in the fourth grade? Online streaming audio stations provide music that is similar to that never-ending song—the tracks keep playing one after another until you stop them. If you put MP3s or other music files in a playlist that includes a URL to an Internet radio station, you won't hear any music files from your collection after the streaming radio connection opens. To avoid this separate your Internet radio stations from the standard music files in your playlist. Put the URLs for streaming radio into their own genre-based playlists, such as Dance Radio and Classic Rock Radio, to make it easy to find the kind of music you want in a hurry. And if you are in the mood for the genre but dislike the station's current song, a new option is just a click away.

4 Minimize Monikers

If you cannot read the entire playlist's name, you'll have a hard time knowing what songs are in it. Choose names that are clear and are short enough to fully show on your media player in a comfortable window size and on your portable music player's display. However, avoid shortening the name with too many abbreviations or acronyms. When you need to find a playlist quickly, you don't want to waste time trying to remember what a playlist title means or opening the playlist to see if the songs are appropriate for your situation just because you can't remember if that is the list you need.

5 Describe The Mood

Unless your playlist consists of a single artist or a single album, you may have a hard time coming up with a name that lets you know exactly what is in the list. We suggest naming a list with a mood or an activity that describes the list's content. We have music to help us relax, to motivate us when exercising, to enjoy in the background at a dinner party, and to rock out with friends. Including these activities or moods in your playlist names, such as Workout Music or Songs For Relaxation, makes it easy to select an appropriate mix quickly.



BY DACIA L. ROLANDO

First Glimpse Advertising Section

This special advertising section presents the latest consumer electronics products now coming on the market. Browse through these First Glimpse pages to learn about new products before they appear on your local store shelves.

AUDIO/VIDEO

Sling Media Slingbox 88
Pioneer PRO-1120HD 90
Marantz SR9600 Multi-Channel Receiver 92

CAMERAS & CAMERA ACCESSORIES

Pentax OptioWP 94
JVC GZ-MG20 96
Konica Minolta DiMAGE Z20 Digital Camera 98

AROUND THE HOME

Nokia 770 Internet Tablet 100
JVC XA-MP51 Digital Audio Player 102

Advertisement

Sling Media Slingbox
MSRP: $249.99
www.slingmedia.com

TV Anywhere, Anytime

The Slingbox is a compact, state-of-the-art electronic device that connects to the back of your TV. It redirects, or "placeshifts," the TV signal from your cable box, satellite receiver, or DVR (digital video recorder) to your computer or laptop of choice, no matter your location—so long as you have a high-speed Internet connection. This utterly unique device will transform the way you watch TV. Whether you want to watch your soaps in the laundry room, catch the big game during a conference call, or watch your local news from China, the power is now in your hands.

With a virtual wave of a magic wand, every PC can be transformed into your TV as long as you have a high-speed

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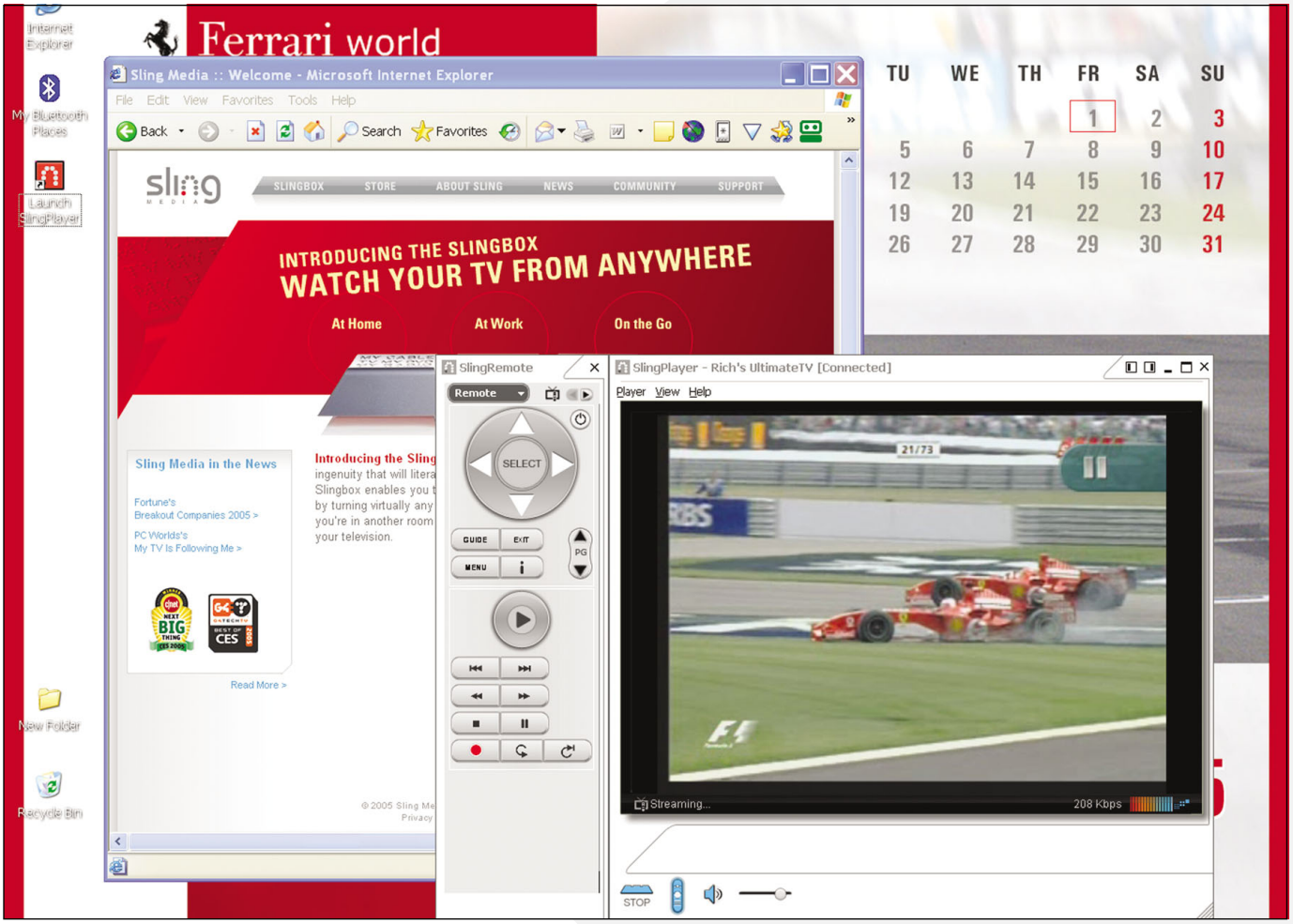

Internet connection. Now, you can watch live TV using the SlingPlayer software. You can also control and manage your TiVo or DVR from anywhere.

The Slingbox requires no new or ongoing subscription fees. Available in stores today, the Slingbox is sold nationwide at consumer electronics retailers Best Buy and CompUSA, as well as online at www.bestbuy.com and www.compusa.com.

Advertisement

Pioneer PRO-1120HD
MSRP: $13,500.00
www.pioneer.com

50-Inch Elite PureVision Plasma Television

Pioneer's Elite PRO-1120HD 50-inch widescreen HD (high-definition) plasma TV is ready to deliver the best on high-definition cable, satellite, and DVD in your home. Whether you're watching movies, concerts, or the 5 o'clock news, your TV room will be transformed.

Pioneer's exclusive PureDrive keeps video signals entirely in a lossless digital domain for greater signal control and far higher video quality.

DCR (Digital Cable Ready) Tuner with Passport Banner (requires PSIP support) provides easy plug and play of basic cable channels without the need for an outboard cable box.

With Pioneer's new Advanced PureCinema with 3-3 pull-down, any film-based material on DVD, VHS, and even regular TV will match the smooth, natural reproduction you'd see in a theater.

Advertisement

Color Management selectively boosts or scales back values to match actual images without affecting other colors on the screen.

The clear front of the PRO-1120HD is a precisely manufactured, optical-grade, nonglass panel. It acts as a color filter that increases the spectrum of light emitted by the plasma, for a fuller range of colors and exceptional color accuracy vs. previous versions, which use front filters made of glass. It also increases contrast by limiting ambient light reflections in bright viewing environments.

The PRO-1120HD is also covered by the Elite two-year limited warranty.

Pioneer sound.vision.soul

Marantz SR9600 Multichannel Receiver
MSRP: $4,199.00
www.marantz.com

Redefining "State Of The Art"

The Marantz SR9600 is a multichannel A/V receiver that brings a new level of fidelity and installation flexibility to the premium receiver category. For example, the innovative amplifier design utilizes a special tunnel-type heat sink with an extremely quiet variable speed fan that doesn't activate until serious heat conditions occur, ensuring users of audiophile-level silence.

In addition, the SR9600 is one of the first products in the world to use the new Cirrus Logic CS49502 DSP chip. This chip has unprecedented processing power and utilizes two 32-bit cores for the ability to complete over 260 million instructions per second. This enables extremely complex post-processing of the most sophisticated audio signals. The SR9600 also features a strengthened chassis, as well as a host of advanced technologies including new high-speed twin 32-Bit DSP Chipsets, audiophile-grade DACs, two IEEE1394 ports, seven channels of equal power amplification, and HDMI switching.

Advertisement

To add flexibility and versatility, the SR9600 features a three-zone version of Marantz' acclaimed multisource, multi-zone capability. Each of the two additional zones can be amplified and controlled from the front panel, via either IR or RS232 connectors.

The 9600's precision Flywheel Gyro-Touch AM/FM tuner is capable of storing up to 50 station presets. The fold-down front panel allows for a clean, symmetrical design while concealing the fully functional, cursor-controlled menu. The rugged, copper-plated chassis prevents internal vibrations from radiating to the exterior of the receiver, virtually eliminating noise intrusion and maintaining quality sound.

marantz®

Pentax OptioWP
MSRP: $350
www.pentax.com

Amphibious, Elegant Digital Camera You'll Take Everywhere

This is all-weather digital. Snorkel, ski, or attend a stunning wedding, and you'll never stop snapping with the OptioWP. This latest digital camera delivers both on land and in the sea with a fast 0.6-second start up, a quick 0.05-second shutter release, movie mode, and a generous 2-inch monitor. A beautiful and petite JIS Class 8 waterproof-rated exterior promises you'll capture images in all environments, from just under the water's surface to the most formal settings. Finally, your wait is over for a petite, durable, go-everywhere digital camera.

Slim, Stylish Design

The slim OptioWP body is less than one inch in depth, so it slips easily into a pocket or bag while the stylish aluminum alloy design offers a comfortable grip.

Waterproof Performance

Go ahead and swim with the OptioWP. The camera features a rust-resistant metal exterior, rubber sealants, and lens protection that opens up a new world of photographic potential. Users can shoot in rain, in snow, in the pool, or on the beach to capture all sorts of outdoor scenes. The JIS Class 8 waterproof rating confirms the OptioWP will remain watertight even when the camera is used in water.*

*The OptioWP may be submerged and operated up to five feet underwater for up to 30 minutes.

The Power Of 5MP & A 3X Optical Zoom Lens

Despite the elegant design, the OptioWP captures delicate detail with 5 effective megapixels, while the 3X zoom lens

Advertisement

(equivalent to a 38mm to 114mm lens in 35mm format) captures both expansive scenery shots and tightly composed portraits without protruding from camera body.

Generous LCD

The OptioWP features a large, low-reflection, 2-inch LCD that makes it easy to view even in sunny, outdoor conditions. The LCD also features a power-saving mode to extend battery life.

Movie-Editing Function

A movie editing function allows recorded movies to be edited in the camera. You can store one frame of a movie as a still image or select a movie and divide it into different frames for storage in separate files. Two movies may also be combined into one.

Clock Mode

Press and hold the OK button while the power is turned off, and the OptioWP displays the time on the LCD monitor to confirm current time, anytime, compatible with the World time function.

PENTAX®

Advertisement

JVC GZ-MG20
MSRP: $800 (Available in August)
www.jvc.com

No Tape, No Disc: New JVC Camcorder Features Large-Capacity, Built-in Hard Drive

The new JVC Everio G Series records more than 10.5 hours of DVD-quality video and eliminates the need to carry tapes, discs, or any media at all, yet it can record up to seven hours of DVD-quality video. It also records more than 10.5 hours at a quality level comparable to a DVD camcorder's 30-minute mode. This camcorder records to a built-in hard disk drive and will be available in 20GB and 30GB versions, offering unprecedented camcorder storage capacity.

The reasonably-priced, 20GB GZ-MG20 provides seven hours of DVD camcorder-quality (30-minute mode) video. To put the storage capacity in context, it would take 22 DVD camcorder discs (8 cm/1.4GB discs) to hold seven hours of video.

Despite the high capacity storage, the GZ-MG20 is small enough and light enough to easily take anywhere. It is truly palm-sized and weighs less than 14 ounces with the battery attached. The design is similar to a MiniDV camcorder,

which means they're comfortable to hold and operate and include a large, 2.5-inch flip-out LCD for easy recording.

Playback is easy, too, with multiple connections allowing convenient TV playback; dubbing to a VCR or DVD recorder; transfer to a PC or Apple Macintosh for DVD creation, editing, or posting on the Internet; or even burned directly without a PC to a full length movie DVD disc using an optional DVD burner.

JVC
The Perfect Experience

Advertisement

Konica Minolta DiMAGE Z20 Digital Camera
MSRP: $329.99
www.konicaminolta.com

Speed, Power & Mega Zoom

Konica Minolta's DiMAGE Z20 5MP digital camera features a built-in 8X optical zoom lens and specializes in taking high-quality close-up portraits, as well as distant scenic landscapes.

The camera's 8X optical Mega Zoom lens and 4X digital zoom combine for a total 32X zoom, allowing users to capture everything from sporting events to panoramic scenery. The optical lens system consists of 11 elements in nine groups and includes two aspheric lenses; a construction that adds up to sharp, high-quality images. The new DiMAGE Z20 combines a 5MP primary-color CCD with proprietary CxProcess III image processing technology for pictures that are exactly the way the photographer sees them.

The Konica Minolta DiMAGE Z20's Rapid AF combines a passive AF sensor with the video AF system, giving a fast focusing time of approximately 0.3 seconds in both the wide-angle and telephoto positions. The Rapid AF also has Predictive Focus Control, which predicts where a moving subject is heading and focuses accordingly. To

Advertisement

round out the list of quick-response features, the DiMAGE Z20 has the fastest startup in its class (approximately 0.5 seconds), a short shutter-release time lag, and continuous shooting.

The DiMAGE Z20 allows users to take up to approximately 450 frames with the four included AA alkaline batteries. Its Macro mode allows photographers to bring the lens as close as 0.4 inches from the subject, and it can also take high-quality movie clips in VGA (640 x 480) size.

The DiMAGE Z20 weighs just 10.6 ounces. Its ergonomic form gives users a steady grip, while its intuitive control button layout makes it easy for even amateur photographers to enjoy all the benefits of digital photography.

KONICA MINOLTA

Advertisement

Nokia 770 Internet Tablet
MSRP: Expected to retail at around $350
www.nokia.com

Go Ahead—Move The Web!

With the Nokia 770 Internet Tablet, you can browse your favorite sites and catch up on your email from right where you are. Whether you're relaxing on the sofa or enjoying the moment at your favorite café, if you have broadband access over Wi-Fi, the Nokia 770 Internet Tablet gives you instant wireless access to the Web. You can also stream files, tune in to Internet radio or News Reader, or play your favorite videos and music.

The Nokia 770 Internet Tablet is easy to use and easy on your eyes, too, with a truly portable design, fashionably discrete brushed metal cover, and an ultra-sharp widescreen display that's optimized for viewing online content.

Ready to move? The Nokia 770 Internet Tablet will be available online at www.nokia.com.

Nokia 770 Internet Tablet Specifications:

Size

- Weight: 8.1 ounces
- Dimensions: 3.1 x 5.5 x 0.7 inches (HxWxD)

Advertisement

Color
- Black and matte silver

Display
- High-resolution (800 x 480) touchscreen with up to 65,536 colors

Memory
- Engine: DDR RAM 64MB
- Memory: Flash 128MB
- Memory card: 64MB RS-MMC (Reduced Size-MultiMediaCard)

Operating System
- Internet Tablet 2005 software edition

NOKIA

Advertisement

JVC XA-MP51 Digital Audio Player
MSRP: $149.99 (Available in July)
www.jvc.com

A Matchbook-Sized Digital Audio Player

JVC's new matchbook-size digital audio player comes in either 1GB or 512MB worth of storage capacity. The flash memory player features a built-in FM stereo tuner, a voice recorder, and a large, backlit, four-line dot matrix display.

The 512MB model, called XA-MP51, supports both MP3 and WMA (DRM) files. It connects to a PC using the player's USB 2.0 port, and there is no software required—adding files is a simple drag-and-drop procedure.

The XA-MP51 is truly pocket-sized, measuring a mere two inches square and weighs just 1.5 ounces with the single AAA battery installed. The player is available in blue or white.

Advertisement

In addition to the FM tuner and voice recorder, other features include FM stereo recording from the tuner, five preset equalization modes, playlist editing, and bass boost. There is also a line-out jack for routing the sound through another music system and a headphone jack. To ensure top-quality sound, both players use an 18-bit D/A (digital-to-analog) converter, and the included headphones feature neodymium drivers.

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music & movies

music

BY ELIZABETH DIXON

Fruit Bats

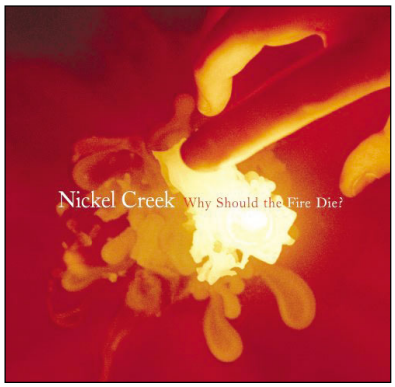
"Spelled In Bones"
Available: Now • Price: $13.98

Sub Pop, the behemoth of independent record labels, strikes again with the Fruit Bats' newest release, "Spelled In Bones." We are pleased to be able to count on Sub Pop to get us through this time of year's expected lull in music releases.

This album gets off to a raucous start with its opening track, "Lives Of Crime." With lyrical candy the album lures you in and takes you for an emotional, optimistic ride, culminating with the seventh track, "The Earthquake of '73," in which vocalist Eric Johnson pleas: "So I'll do my part/Not to break your heart/And, baby, please don't break mine." This song is begging us to listen to it. Over and over. And again.

We can't help but compare this band to The Shins, and some of the tracks and ambient effects hark back to the good-feeling days of The Beatles. That's right, The Beatles. (We're not afraid to say it, either.)

Music this rousing should come with some sort of warning label.



Nickel Creek

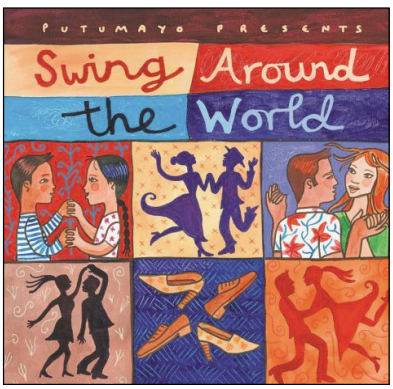
"Why Should The Fire Die?"
Available: Now • Price: $18.98

If bluegrass is your thing, this acoustic trio will keep you entertained. Nickel Creek elevates traditional bluegrass to a more dynamic level, while holding true to its country roots. The fire certainly hasn't died; harmony never sounded so hot.

Emily Lord

"Brand New Day"
Available: Now • Price: $14.99

New mother Emily Lord arrives back on the scene with her third album, "Brand New Day." Full of country twang, this inspirational album expresses the emotions of becoming a mom. She artfully combines soul like that of the Indigo Girls with an upbeat style.



Putumayo

"Swing Around The World"
Available: Aug. 2 • Price: $15.98

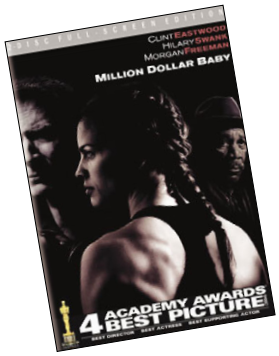
"Swing Around The World" is a jazzy compilation that will expose your kids to culture, and Mom will likely have some fun, too. Part of the album's proceeds go to the National Dance Institute, which helps people around the world boogie.

Minus The Bear

"Menos El Oso"
Available: Aug. 23 • Price: $13.99

Minus The Bear bucks the indie norm with party tunes on "Menos El Oso." The songs' fast-paced tempos, calculative beats, and perceptive lyrics make this album better than your average poppy sound. If you need a little pick-me-up, this album is for you.

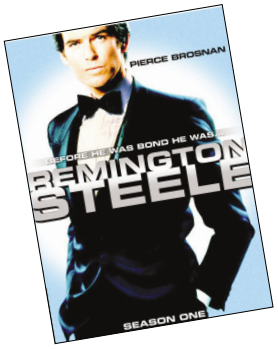
BY SAMIT G. CHOUDHURI



"Million Dollar Baby" (Two-Disc Widescreen Edition)

$29.95 • Available: Now

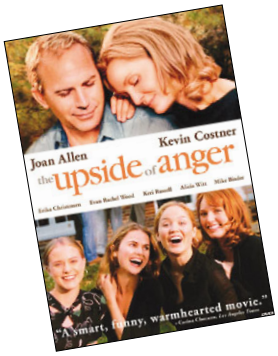
Earlier this year "Million Dollar Baby" won Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Director (Clint Eastwood), Best Actress (Hilary Swank), and Best Supporting Actor (Morgan Freeman), but it lost out on Best Actor, Best Editing, and Best Adapted Screenplay—a total of seven nominations. Swank's character, Maggie Fitzgerald, joins Frankie Dunn's (Eastwood) boxing gym. She's had a tough go at life and feels a need to make a name for herself as a boxer, much to the chagrin of male-chauvinist trainer Frankie. The movie starts out as a lighthearted, feel-good film that transitions into what we expect to be a Rocky-esque film that then transitions into a heartfelt drama. We never expected the ending we got. This movie deserved its Oscars and looks and sounds great on DVD.



"Remington Steele: Season One" Box Set

$39.98 • Available: Now

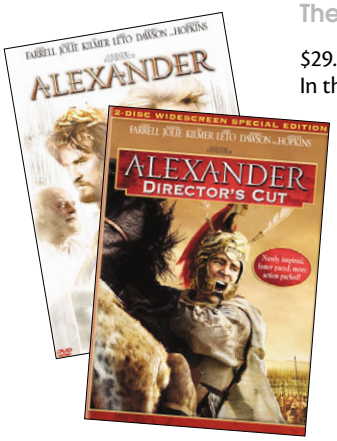
The DVD cover reads, "Before he was Bond, he was Remington Steele." In the mid-1980s, Pierce Brosnan was slated to take over Roger Moore's role as 007. Unfortunately, NBC would not release him from his contract, and it wasn't until 1995's "GoldenEye" that Brosnan finally stepped into the role. His character in "Remington Steele" was a hybrid between Bond and Inspector Clouseau; he was the persona behind the Remington Steele detective agency run by Laura Holt (Stephanie Zimbalist), who was the show's primary character. The show was hugely popular in the 1980s. The dynamic between its two primary characters is similar to Maddie and David in "Moonlighting." (See our July issue, page 107.) The four double-sided DVDs in this package house all 22 episodes of the first season.



"The Upside Of Anger"

$27.95 • Available: Now

It's not often you find yourself rooting for an alcoholic, but that's what Joan Allen's superb portrayal as single mom Terry Wolfmeyer leads you to do. Terry spirals into despair after her husband leaves her for a younger woman. Unfortunately, her four high school- and college-aged daughters are left to take care of themselves. Into the mix comes Kevin Costner in top form as former baseball star Denny Davies (Terry's neighbor). He doesn't initially improve Terry's situation, but he does make the story interesting. This film is definitely worth a viewing for the solid performances and the tight, witty drama that unfolds.

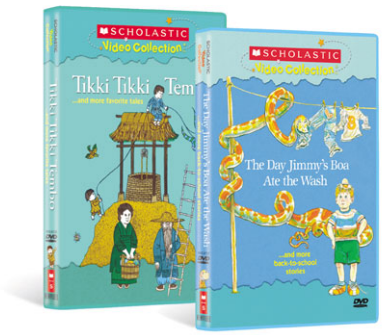


"Alexander" (Widescreen Two-Disc Theatrical/Director's Cut Special Editions)

$29.95 • Available: Aug.2

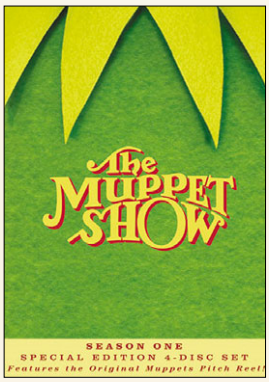
In the 4th century B.C., Alexander the Great traveled from Greece to Persia to India, conquering all along the way. He was a superb leader and a daring tactician and won many a battle against greater odds. A film starring the likes of Colin Farrell (Alexander), Jared Leto (Hephaistion), Anthony Hopkins (Old Ptolemy), Angelina Jolie (Olympias), Val Kilmer (Philip), Christopher Plummer (Aristotle), and Rosario Dawson (Roxane) comes with high expectations—especially when it's directed by Oliver Stone ("Platoon," "Born On The Fourth Of July," "JFK"). It's unfortunate, then, that "Alexander" fails to live up to expectations with its muddled storyline that jumps jarringly from situation to situation. However, it's not the train wreck critics made it out to be, and it is quite watchable on home video. We're just disappointed that it's not the great film it could have been.

Back-To-School DVDs



"The Day Jimmy's Boa Ate The Wash . . . And More Back-To-School Stories"

Available Now. Do you have young ones heading off to school? If so, this new release is for you (or your 3- to 9-year-old children). You get five read-along stories, including the one noted in the title, "Shrinking Violet" (narrated by Calista "Ally McBeal" Flockhart), and "Will I Have A Friend?" If you like this DVD, also check out the Scholastic Collection's "Tikki Tikki Tembo . . . And More Favorite Tales."



"The Muppet Show: Season One"

Available Aug. 9. It's finally here. This Special Edition, four-disc set features classic Muppet goodness as you best remember it, along with the original pitch reel, pilot, and other supplements. All 24 episodes have been fully restored and remastered to look and sound great.

games . . .

for you and the people in your life

BY VINCE COGLEY

Multiplatform

Madden NFL 06

Entering its 16th season as the leading football video game, each installment of EA's Madden NFL game seems almost as anticipated as the NFL season itself. Quarterback Vision Control makes passing more realistic, as better quarterbacks have a broader field of vision and can more easily connect with their receivers. NFL Superstar Mode lets you create your own NFL player and guide him to movie roles and product endorsements.

ESRB Rating: (RP)
Rating Pending
Price varies
Electronic Arts
www.ea.com

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory

Grab your Golden Ticket (and personal sense of nostalgia) and prepare to enter the world of Willy Wonka. Based on this summer's feature film from director Tim Burton and Roald Dahl's now timeless classic, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory lets you guide young happy-go-lucky Charlie Bucket through Willy Wonka's famous factory. And in case you were curious, you'll encounter plenty of Oompa Loompas along the way.

ESRB Rating: (E)veryone
$39.99 (PlayStation 2, Xbox, Game Cube); $29.99 (Game Boy Advance)
Take 2 Interactive
www.take2games.com

Nintendo DS

Nintendogs

Think of Nintendo's Nintendogs as having your very own pedigree puppy without all of the potty training. Billed as a "puppy simulator," Nintendogs comes in a few versions that each contain different dog breeds. Not only can you use the Nintendo DSstylus to pet your dog or rub its belly, you can teach it tricks using the DS's built-in microphone. Enter your dog in contests to earn cash for more supplies or even additional canine pals. Kibbles n' Bits not included.

ESRB Rating: (RP)
Rating Pending
$34.99
Nintendo
www.nintendo.com

Revolutionary Cooling Systems Cooper Cooler

Seriously, who among us hasn't wished for a gadget like this? Something goes terrifically right with your day, so you buy a bottle of champagne (er, sorry, sparkling wine) on the way home to celebrate with your significant other. The Cooper Cooler (www.coopercooler.com) is just perfect for such evenings because you'll no longer have to wait an hour for the bubbly to chill. Just add ice and come back in six minutes. It'll even warm up baby bottles. Models are available online for $59.99 and up; some come with 12v adapters for tailgate parties. So cool.

M-Rock Yellowstone & Biscayne Bay

Digital SLRs with telephoto lenses are so pricy, new owners may put off buying a protective camera bag until a few more paychecks hit their bank accounts. And then, it's no easy task to find a decent bag that fits a particular camera. M-Rock can help. Its new Yellowstone ($44; www.m-rock.com) is just the ticket for Canon EOS Digital Rebels, Nikon D70s, and other full-sized models with lenses up to four inches long. The bag even has bungee cords underneath it for extra cargo. Fitting smaller point-and-shoot cameras is M-Rock's new Biscayne Bay case ($16).

Turtle Beach Ear Force HPA

What is it with guy movies and surround sound? Sometimes it seems like the only DVDs men want to watch are the ones that require a 5.1-channel system cranked up loud enough to rattle the picture frames. If Jerry Bruckheimer and John Woo are messing up your domestic tranquility, give your guy these 5.1 headphones from Turtle Beach ($99.95; www.turtlebeach.com). They don't "fake" surround sound—they actually have separate speakers, volume controls, and 1/8-inch audio plugs for front, center, surround, and subwoofer channels. They'll work with gaming consoles, PCs, and other devices, too.

. . . & gifts

on the lighter side of technology

BY MARTY SEMS

Retro

The Evolution Of Laptops

1981 Epson HX-20

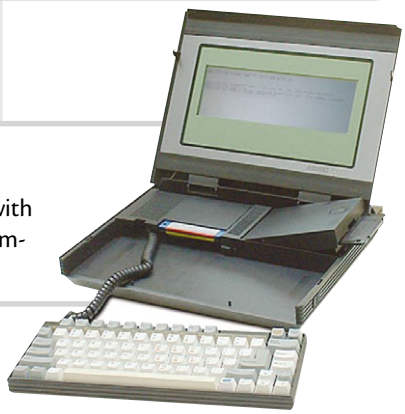
Although there were earlier computers designed to be carried around, Epson released the first computer you could really use on your lap. The $795 HX-20 had a paltry 16KB of memory and a tiny 20-character wide by four-line tall LCD, but at only about 3.5 pounds, you could take it anywhere.

1983 Gavilan SC

Believe it or not, touchpads on laptops date all the way back to 1983, when the $3,995 Gavilan SC incorporated one above the keyboard to help navigate the small black-and-white LCD. This wasn't the first laptop computer, but it had many of the elements we associate with today's laptops.

1985 Kaypro 2000

The $1,995 Kaypro 2000 was arguably the first laptop to look like today's laptops, with a clamshell top that extended nearly to the back of the unit. This 12.1-pound DOS computer had a pop-up floppy drive and a keyboard that could be pulled out of the shell.



1986 IBM 5140 Convertible

The 5140 (around $2,000) was IBM's first true laptop computer, sporting an integrated handle, a flip-up screen that could be removed, and two state-of-the-art 3.5-inch floppy diskette drives. The machine was odd in that its peripherals, including the printer, attached to the back of the unit, making it look like the laptop equivalent of a stretch limo.

1989 Macintosh Portable

Apple may be known for its sleek laptops now, but in 1989, the ironically named Macintosh Portable turned the company into the laughing stock of the industry. On paper this laptop was amazing, but in reality it was a 15.8-pound monster that was not fun to carry. It also wasn't easy on the pocketbook, costing $6,500.

scope

1989

NEC UltraLite

The same year that the Macintosh Portable was busting kneecaps, the $2,795 NEC UltraLite materialized like the ghost of Christmas future. It had about the same measurements as a sheet of legal paper, was only 1.4 inches thick when closed, and weighed a mere 4.4 pounds.

1992

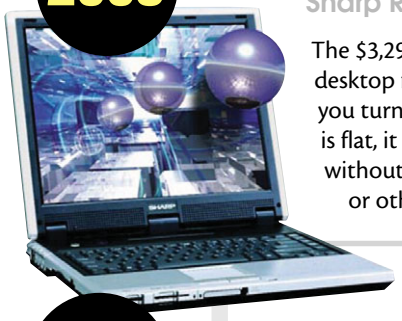
IBM ThinkPad 700C

In 1992 the sleek, black $4,350 ThinkPad 700C established IBM's newfound dominance in the laptop business. During a time when most laptops had black-and-white screens and minimal storage space, the 700C came with a 10.4-inch color display and had a generous 120MB hard drive.

2003

Sharp RD3D

The $3,299 RD3D looks like any other desktop replacement laptop until you turn it on. Although the screen is flat, it can display objects in 3D without the need for special glasses or other additional hardware.



1994

PowerBook 500 Series

Although Apple redeemed itself (and then some) in 1991 with the PowerBook 100, it really outdid itself with 1994's PowerBook 500 Series (starting at $2,270). Firsts included a touchpad near the front of the keyboard, integrated stereo speakers, a PC Card slot, and a battery that could tell the operating system how much charge remained.

2005

OQO Model 01

How about one laptop for each knee? The $1,899 OQO Model 01 weighs less than a pound and looks like a PDA, but it is really a Windows XP computer. The touchscreen slides up to reveal a keyboard and pointing device, and there are even USB and FireWire ports despite the device's tiny size (0.9 x 4.9 x 3.4 inches [HxWxD] when lying flat and closed).

What's Next?

Intel is pushing for laptops that run for eight hours or more on a single charge by 2010, and its Pentium M processors are allowing for laptops that, in many cases, are faster than some desktop PCs. Tomorrow's laptops will also have improved integrated wireless networking hardware, better displays, and much more hard drive space compared to today's models.

BY TRACY BAKER

exit

Back-To-School CE

Ah, September. Time to stuff your backpack with everything you need to go back to school. Here we outline some devices that give new meaning to "school supplies."

LAPTOP BACKPACK
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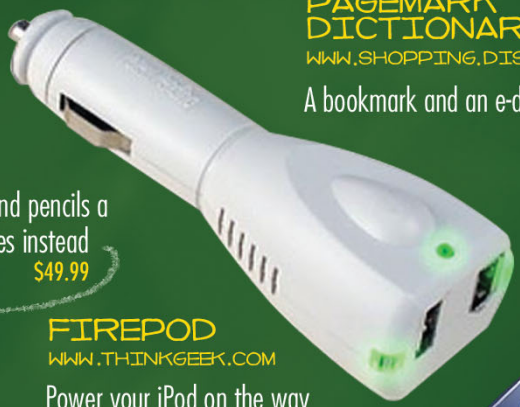

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